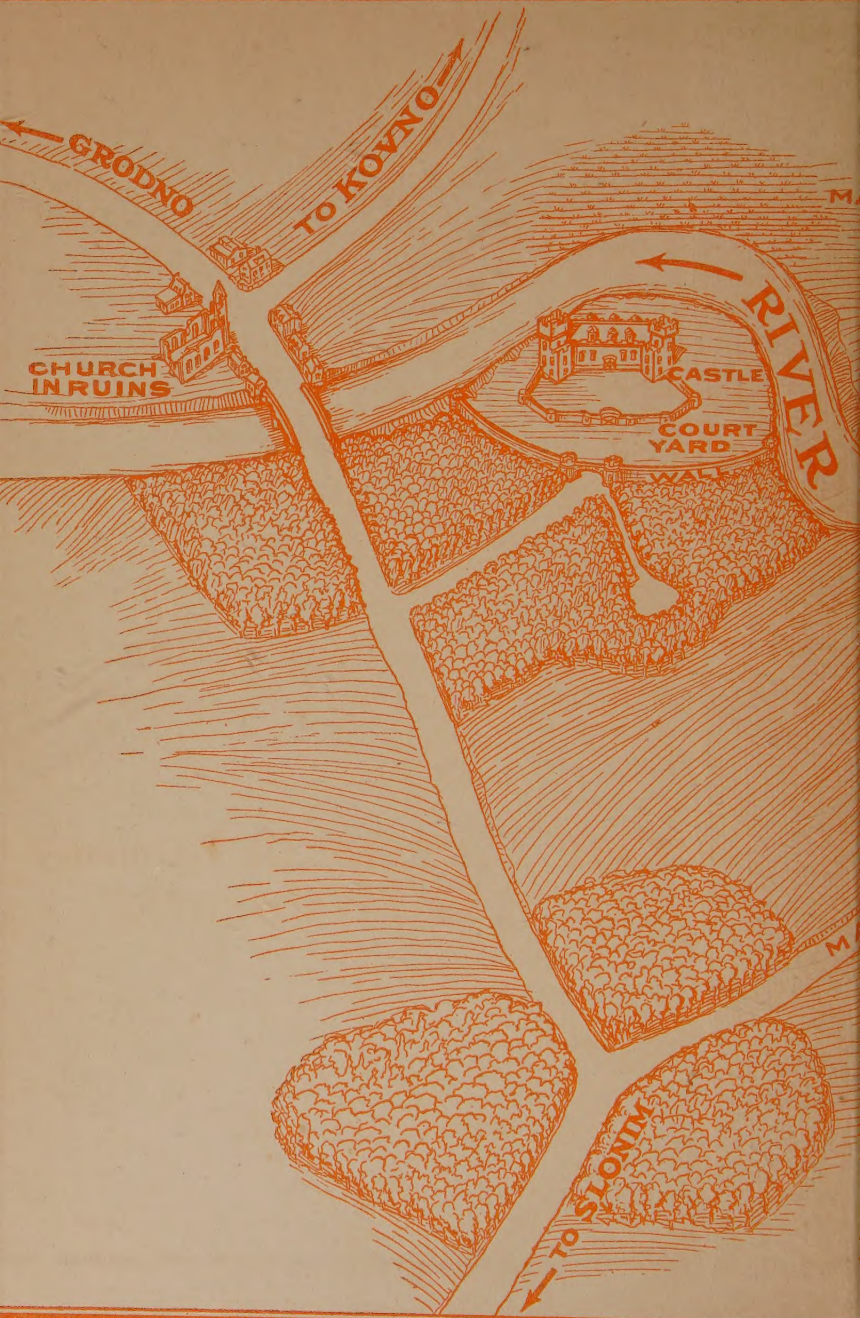


Old Swords



Val Gielgud



GROUND

TO WILNO

SIEMEN

MARSH

ROAD

THE CASTLE OF KONSKI AND ITS ENVIRONS



OLD SWORDS

BY
VAL GIELGUD



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FOR
B. AND J.
IN MEMORY OF SEMIRAMIS

“On we rode, the others and I,
Over the mountains blue, and by
The Silver River, the sounding sea,
And the robber woods of Tartary.”

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.



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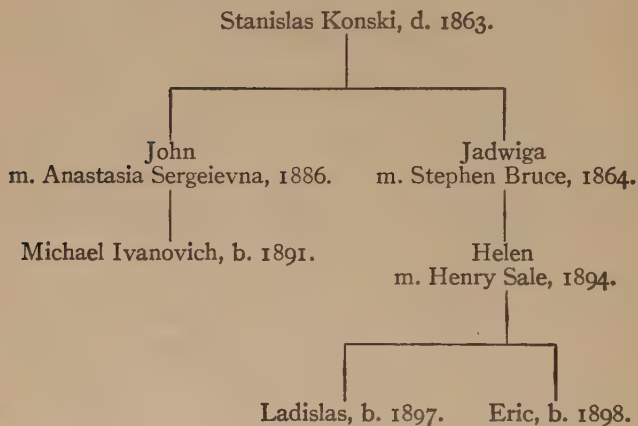
OLD SWORDS



PROLOGUE

POLAND — 1863

THE FAMILY OF KONSKI



OLD SWORDS

PROLOGUE

POLAND — 1863



O you have come back, Stanislas,' said Josef Skulski.

'Ça se voit,' replied his cousin. 'You were always a practical person, Josef, and inclined to insistence upon the obvious. But this time I don't think that even you can find anything more to say concerning circumstances so blatantly deplorable.'

And Stanislas Konski sank wearily into a chair.

~~— Indeed, there was nothing more to be said. An~~ observer with an eye for the picturesque, a taste for the dramatic and heroic, would have seen something symbolic in that old and broken man, returned to the home of his ancestors: an example in grimy flesh of the tragedy of a nation's agony and dismemberment. But Josef Skulski was a practical man of forty-five. His father had married a Jewess. And in his eyes his cousin Stanislas was less one of the gallant defenders of a hopeless cause than a foolish, probably a dying, old man; and the Polish insurrection of 1863, a futile and histrionic gesture in the face of an indifferent Europe, outside the pale of practical politics, which was only meeting the fate it had deserved — almost demanded.

There followed a long silence in the hall of the old Konski castle, while the shadows played at hide-and-seek along the walls, and the flickering firelight rose and fell, so that the antlered heads, the tarnished portraits, the skins of wolf and bear, leaped into sudden visibility and faded out again, with a curious effect of unreality.

Josef stared at his cousin, who was jerking great lumps of mud from his riding-boots with his scabbarded sword. Outside the wind moaned through the Polish pines, cried along the walls of the castle, and tapped at the windows as if with invisible fingers.

'Anton is bringing a bottle of wine and the candles,' said Stanislas Konski at last, with a sudden jerk of his grey head. 'We must talk for a little, Josef.'

His cousin smiled grimly.

'I observe,' said he, 'that, as usual, the theorist is about to transfer the burden of affairs, of which he has made a hideous bungle, to the shoulders of the practical dullard.'

'You are always right, Josef.' A grin split Stanislas's mud-stained, haggard face. 'What is more, Josef, you will shoulder that burden gladly enough. Is it because you admire me in the depths of your rather mean little soul, or because you wish to prove your essential, your unmistakeable superiority?'

'Does it matter so long as I shoulder it?'

'Not in the least. Nothing matters very much.

Poland, I admit it, is dead again. But Poland has been free for a little while. If anything matters at all, that matters. As a phrase it will not die, and it will serve to make the ghost walk. And phrases may yet serve Poland better than old swords.' And Stanislas unbuckled his sword, and let it clatter to the floor unregarded.

Josef stirred it delicately with the point of a buckled shoe. 'So — as you say, I was right. I am always right, eh, Stanislas? I was right when I called you a fool to take it down from the wall, and to join that most incompetent of amateur generals before Brody? We were both right. You to call me a fool, I to play the Polish gentleman. One must do what one can. We are both right now.'

Skulski shrugged impatiently. Behind him a heavy, iron-studded door was opened quietly, and two scared servants entered with candles flaring in the draught, glasses, and a bottle of wine.

Stanislas Konski heaved himself out of the chair, and stood very erect and stiff before the fire.

'The insurrection is at an end,' he said curtly, as if issuing orders. 'The Russians are beating the country for fugitive rebels. I prefer not to witness a battue of my servants, Anton. You will tell them all to leave the castle as soon as possible, and to remain quietly in their homes. I regret that I can do no more for you.'

For a moment the servants waited by the door,

white-faced, shifting their feet. Stanislas Konski disregarded them. He had turned to his cousin. 'We have no time to quarrel over the rights and wrongs, Josef,' he said calmly. 'Most of the army is crossing the Prussian frontier. But I had the children to consider, and I yielded to a natural sentimentality in the desire to see my home again. I have lived here for seventy years, and I prefer to die here.'

In spite of his steady speech, the old man was rocking on his feet, and above the tight military collar his face showed almost livid with fatigue. He sat down again heavily in the chair.

Skulski sniffed impatiently.

'You would have done better to think of the children before,' he growled. 'This persistent attitudinising! Change your clothes, Stanislas, while I get the children ready. The frontier is not so far. With a carriage, a little bluff, a little money, the thing is done. Go and change your clothes.'

'I am too tired,' said Stanislas Konski simply.

Josef shot out a protesting hand, the thick, stubby-fingered, hairy hand of common-sense. But before he could speak, he was interrupted. 'I am too tired even to change so that I may die decently in clean linen,' Stanislas went on. 'At least I can die mentally well groomed. It may be folly, but it serves to pass a tiresome interval of waiting ——' He stopped. Then his voice lost its even tenour, shrilled suddenly. 'Good God, man! Have you ever seen a

rout? A beaten army on the run? Do you know what it is to go without sleep for three days? To eat carrion? To drink stinking water? To shoot men who have ridden behind you in a charge, for stragglers? Get John and Jadwiga.'

He gasped for breath. His hands clenched upon his knees, and he sank back in the great chair.

Skulski finished his wine, shrugged again, and turned to the door.

Stanislas Konski did not move. Wearied as he was, almost to death, numbed with physical fatigue, and that mental quietude which accompanies irretrievable disaster, he was content to accept the drowsiness induced by the warmth of burning logs and red wine. He closed his eyes. In the light of the fire his face might have been the bronzed death-mask of some venerable king. And as overstrained nerves and muscles relaxed together, quaintly disconnected thoughts fluttered across his mind, as gulls circle aimlessly above a Baltic bay.

It was odd, this business of dying . . . odd, that even on the brink of dissolution one's inadequate body should persist in appreciation of the warmth of a fire, of the taste of good wine upon the palate . . . odd, how in the end nothing seemed to matter very much, when one had only lived because everything had been of such acute significance. Stanislas Konski had been born, had lived, eaten, drunk, slept, married, begotten children, loved, slain men in bat-

tle, and spent money upon objects reputable and otherwise. But in the long run all came to the same thing . . . back to where one started . . . the castle of Konski, where he had been born . . . ultimately to the unknown from which he had come. Stanislas Konski was dying. ~~And had he lived in all respects differently, Stanislas Konski would still have had to~~ die. And, curiously enough, he did not mind. It was only strange that when death was so foreseen, so inevitable, so final, people should worry about, expect so much from life. . . . Skulski and the children were taking a long time . . . odd, how often the really worthy people were such bores . . . but it was rather a pity never to know what would happen to Jadwiga and to John; a pity, and even a little unfair. . . .

But that disquieting vision of his children going unguarded, heedless and alone, into the wilderness of the world Stanislas Konski thrust resolutely from him. They would work out their own salvation, he thought, a trifle unconvincingly. The dog-eared phrase he remembered so often on his own father's lips would serve as comfort in extremity. After all, they had the blood in them. And with a sense of the appropriate, Stanislas sought to recall memories of his own childhood, of his parents, and of the grim old castle beside the Niemen, as companions for his lonely vigil. They might serve to warm his heart, as the wine had warmed his blood. But, somehow, when they came, they came hesitantly: phantoms of

no significance. And he thought that he had been right to recognise sentiment for what it is: a great power, but a power of this world only.

'Quite frankly,' muttered Stanislas Konski to himself, 'I am not nerved to die the more contentedly nor the more decently by thoughts of my parents and friends long dead and buried; of girls I kissed willingly or unwillingly in the darker corners of this hall; nor even of a boy also long dead, who was once called Stanislas Konski. Death is neither sentimentalist nor romantic. He is mere fact; often painful, sometimes stupid, invariably interfering; always fact . . . ' He sat up suddenly, blinking.

'Where is Josef?' he said. 'I am already maundering absurdly. Second-hand philosophy of second childhood!'

His old-fashioned spurs clinked as he stirred in his chair.

He was leisurely refilling his glass when Skulski re-entered the room, muffled in furs, obviously nervous, and with Jadwiga behind him. Stanislas's daughter was a pale, slim girl of twenty, short but beautifully proportioned. Her eyes were blue, with a hint of steely grey; her lips tight and decisive. There was something pathetically reminiscent of her father in the proud carriage of her head, in the sensitive nostrils and challenging nose. Jadwiga was no beauty; but even at twenty, and in '63, she knew her own mind.

'John cannot be found,' stammered Josef Skulski, fumbling with his driving-gloves.

His cousin seemed not to have heard. Jadwiga was between his knees, her head pressed against his shabby uniform, her big, slender hands fondling his unshaven cheeks. Her eyes were tearless. Only once or twice she seemed to swallow something hard and round that neither choked her nor yet would go down her throat. Neither she nor her father spoke. Indeed, what was there to be said?

Skulski coughed impatiently.

'There is no time to lose,' he said at last. 'Come, Stanislas. Don't be obstinate, man! Come with us! John is a young fool of the same breed! I expect he's hiding away somewhere to stay with you. Young seventeen believes in heroisms. You're too old for that nonsense! What is heroic about a firing-party? It's not worth it!'

Stanislas's mouth twitched beneath his moustache.

'Take Jadwiga and go,' he jerked out, 'before I lose my temper! Must you always envy God his understanding of everything before you stir a hand? Damn your eternal prudence! I tell you I am on the proscribed list! You know something of the Prussians, my dear cousin. You and two children are of no value to any one. You will pass unremarked. But von Bismarck would appreciate the Grand Duke's gratitude, and the gift of a few poor devils of

proscribed Poles, who have trusted to Prussian hospitality, is a simple way of earning it! You fool, why do you think I did not cross the frontier with the army? I prefer to die here.'

He broke off, and burst into a spasm of coughing.

'You make me talk too much, Josef,' he gasped, and lifted a handkerchief quickly to his lips.

The girl scrambled to her feet, caught at her father's hand, and kissing it clumsily, turned to Skulski.

'We must go,' he said harshly.

Stanislas Konski stared after them as they slowly crossed the hall. 'Good-bye, my dear,' he said quietly. 'Never forget that you are a Pole, with the prescriptive right of making of yourself an infernal nuisance to all other nations ——'

Jadwiga did not turn her head. She walked out into the torch-lighted courtyard, straight, but stumblingly, as if with blind eyes.

'There is nothing to be done with these old men,' said Josef Skulski, as he put her into the carriage, and wrapped a rug about her. He felt her body quivering like a wire suddenly struck. But she made no reply. She had turned her head away from him, to stare fixedly at the dim outline of the castle looming against the uncaring stars, as if to impress its gloomy desolation for ever on her mind.

'Que diable dans cette galère ——?' grumbled

Skulski, as the horses started forward into the darkness.

In the deserted hall Stanislas Konski shifted the stained handkerchief from mouth to eyes. He felt weak and sick and terribly lonely. Irrational that, when he should have had in any event to leave Jadwiga so soon, he should rebel, feel sorry for himself, because she had left him.

"I suppose that I love her," he said wonderingly, and felt his weakness excused. For in his seventy years Stanislas had loved few but himself, and those few neither faithfully nor as a rule profitably.

There remained the question of John, his son. And with the acknowledgement of his love for Jadwiga, Stanislas had clearly to acknowledge that he felt no love for his son. It was a pity, but he could not help it. And again he did not mind. He was curious about John. He wished him well. He felt a little ashamed that he was no more than curious, neither worried nor angry, about John's disappearance. And yet, after all, why bother to keep up such elaborate pretences as that of affection for a child thoroughly unsympathetic at such a moment? Jadwiga was safe . . . in all reasonable probability. . . . Josef was reliable . . . and the hall was comfortingly warm. . . .

Stanislas Konski's head fell back. He slept, moving a little, moaning a little, like a tired dog, as though troubled by dreams of hard riding, of vil-

lages in flames, of little groups of men dying with a pathetic gallantry under a tattered banner of amaranth and silver. His mouth opened. He snored.

But, while Stanislas Konski thus wanted the setting of high tragedy, of ruined hopes, lost battles, and vain courage, making of his lost cause no more than a subsidiary aid to the soundest sleep he had had for weeks, his son stood outside the castle in the starlight, twisting a rusty pistol in his hands. John Konski was indeed young seventeen. Like his sister he was short, but, unlike her, he was broad, and strongly built: no figure of romance, with his thick, rather sulky mouth, wavering brown eyes, and low forehead. Nevertheless, as he fingered the useless pistol, and stared along the track down which Josef Skulski's carriage had driven, John Konski saw himself momentarily as Poland's last hopeless defender. He was not going to bolt — not he! He was not going to bolt — with a girl! With Josef Skulski, whom he despised as a Jew, if ever there was one, longing to save his oily skin! He was not going to play the coward, desert his father in the very shadow of the castle which he had peopled with his own heroes of romance ever since he had learned to read!

John threw up his head, half raising the pistol, as though in defiance of all the armies of the Tsar of all the Russias. He felt himself a man; a soldier; ten years older. Then he shivered.

The night was growing bitterly cold, the wind rising, crying more loudly among the branches.

His mood thus depressingly chilled by mundane circumstance, John turned towards the castle. Attitudes were preserved more easily in the warm, and one's father was better than no audience at all. But he had hardly taken a step when he spun round again, and stood staring, shaking all over. Excitement, of course!

Four flaring lights were moving up the road towards him, and behind them followed the clatter of hoofs, the squeaking of girths and saddles, the clanking of sabres against stirrup-irons. Here and there a helmet or scabbard gleamed for an instant. John watched, fascinated.

The squadron of Russian dragoons, sickened with a long ride, and the unedifying job of fusillading unarmed, often surrendered fugitives, almost rode over the boy without seeing him, till the charger of the officer in command shied violently. There was an oath and the barking of an order. Then a gauntleted hand gripped John's shoulder, and dragged him roughly into the light of the four torches carried by the leading troopers.

'Who the devil are you?' demanded the Russian.

John said nothing.

'I can't waste time, boy,' the officer went on. 'You must tell me where we are. This God-forsaken country of yours ——' he swore vividly. 'Don't try

the imitation hero, you little fool! This is real, not the nursery game of soldiers! It's war! What is this place?'

He jerked a hand at the dim mass of the Konski castle. To John that great hand with spread fingers, moving above his head, seemed to blot out the very stars. He realised that he was scared to death. But he bit his lip and said nothing.

'Stubborn as well as young, eh?' snarled the Russian, tightening his grip on the boy's shoulder, and groping with the other hand in a holster. 'Now tell me! Quickly!'

And a heavy pistol was placed against John Konski's temple.

Till that shattering instant when the cold steel touched his skin, there had been something unreal about the whole adventure, making it for the boy of no more significance than an unpleasant nightmare. But the touch of the pistol awakened him to hideous reality. He heard with startling clarity the stamp and whinney of a horse, the clinking of bits; smelt the reek of the torches; saw the unmoved callous expression on the ring of bearded faces. It was ghastly to die out there in the dark; to die before he had really lived at all; to die without even an audience of appreciation for his gallantry; in fine, to die. . . .

He writhed in the Russian's grip. There came the click of the pistol being cocked.

'Come along, youngster!'

The touch of kindly humanity broke the boy's nerve, and his decision. An oath or a blow, and he would have stiffened his chin, and died like the man he had felt himself to be those few minutes ago. But that flavour of regret in the Russian's voice, probably, in fact, automatic rather than intended, impatient rather than merciful, brought to John's wavering mind all the inexpressible beauty and tenderness with which life — at seventeen — is armoured. Remembering that, one could not endure to die. . . .

'You are on the Niemen,' he stammered pitifully enough, 'twenty miles from Grodno. I am John Konski.'

The officer jerked him round roughly, and peered down into his working features.

'Son of the rebel, eh?' he said coolly. 'That, of course, is the castle. Stepan, take care of this young man!'

John Konski's wrist was roped to a dragoon's saddle, and the squadron entered the courtyard at a walk.

Stumbling beside his guard's charger, John felt the hot tears pricking his eyelids, trickling down his cheeks. He was very young, and he had seen himself for a combination of braggart and coward. And it is not good for any man to recognise that he cannot face physical pain.

The dragoons were drawn up in double rank facing the unresponsive wall of the castle, in which three long windows glowed with a light, faint and un-

steady. The Russian commander swaggered up the worn steps, clattering scabbard and spurs, and beat violently upon the great door with the hilt of his sword.

Under cover of the darkness John smiled. It would take more than a cavalry sword to open that monumental door. But the smile was stiffened, replaced by an irrepressible cry.

As the Russian lifted his sword again, the door was slowly opened. Stanislas Konski stood on the threshold, a heavy iron candlestick in his left hand. He was once more wearing sword and schapska.

The dragoon stepped back, automatically bringing his weapon on guard. Stanislas shook his head, smiling.

'I am quite at your service,' he said. 'I will not offer you my sword, monsieur, for I feel that you might find it distasteful to murder a prisoner. As it is, I am a rebel, taken in arms against the Tsar. I am that Stanislas Konski who is among those already condemned by His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke. And you have not far to seek for a wall ——'

He bowed, and clicked his spurs.

An almost insane jealousy fired up in John's heart as he watched this successful playing by his father of the beau rôle which he had chosen for himself, in which he had so miserably failed.

The captain of dragoons — his name was Novikoff — sheathed his sword, and saluted.

‘You are considerate, monsieur, to one who sometimes finds his duty a hard thing. If I can serve you in any way ——?’

This exchange of compliments, so satisfactory to Stanislas’s feudal temperament, was rudely broken by a ghastly cry from the courtyard. Stanislas’s hand clenched, rose to his throat, dropped again. So he had been right to be disappointed in John. . . . ‘My son, monsieur le capitaine,’ he said apologetically. ‘If I might speak to him for one moment ——’

Novikoff snapped out an order. The rope was slashed in two, and the next moment John was catching at his father’s hands in an agony of remorse and apprehension. Stanislas took him firmly by both elbows.

‘Listen,’ said he. ‘You are not to blame. That you are suffering now is only your proper desert for not doing as you were told. You should have gone with Jadwiga. But you are not in the least responsible for my death. You can spare yourself the self-indulgence of that passionate emotion — particularly in public! I had made up my mind to await the arrival of these gentlemen, and the obvious outcome. And no one is going to hurt you.’

The boy sobbed uncontrollably.

‘It is the decided policy of His Imperial Highness to encourage the future loyalty of his Polish subjects,’ put in Novikoff, with the suspicion of a cyni-

cal grin. 'You will be treated with all consideration in Saint Petersburg.'

With an articulate cry John broke away and clutched childishly at the pistol in Novikoff's belt. His father dragged him back.

'Let them shoot me with you!' screamed the boy.

'Don't behave like quite such a little idiot!' said Stanislas quellingly. 'Good-bye, my son.'

And, exhausted by his sudden effort, he reeled sideways, and had to clutch at the doorpost for support, breathing heavily. He could only nod gratefully at Novikoff, when two troopers dragged the boy away down the steps, across the echoing courtyard, into the merciful blindness of night and trees.

That gasping travesty of a soldier of Poland, propped against the doorway of his own castle, was John's last sight of his father. As he staggered along the rough road, his arms in the grip of two dragoons, he heard four sharp words of command, with short silences between them. There followed one longer silence; the irregular rattle of lifted carbines; the echoing crash of a volley; one belated shot. Then he fainted.

He had not seen Stanislas Konski striving grimly and in vain to stand erect without the support of his own wall; the studiedly graceful gesture of the hand towards the motionless firing-party; the gleam of Novikoff's falling sword, as he gave the order to fire; the crumpled body stretched at the foot of the wall

in the merciless glare of the torches; the broken, twisted face that stared up at the stars as if in mute protest — not against death, but against this lack of proper dignity in dying.

BOOK I

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

JOHN COMPROMISES

T is well and generally recognised that among the most shattering shocks of this mortal life is categorised the realisation of parents that their children grow up — or have grown up. It is a little difficult to know why this should be so, physical growth being the blatantly obvious thing it is. Nevertheless, the fact remains. On the other hand, there are few people who realise that by far the greatest shock in the life of the average child comes with the knowledge that his or her parents have never grown up; that the whole 'grown-up' tradition with all its elaborate trimmings is a monstrous imposture; and that second childhood is found as often in adolescence as in old age.

The form taken by that shock; the circumstances in which a child for the first time sees its parents as human beings, as opposed to demi-gods of a romantic tradition; these combine to make an influence in the child's life very potent for good or evil, for beauty or ugliness. The moment of its occurrence must depend upon the individual precocity of each particular child. That moment came upon Michael Ivanovich Konski three days after his thirteenth

birthday. In the date the superstitious may find significance. . . .

Before then it could only be said of Michael's relations with his father that he was aware of his existence. His father affected him rather as God and the Tsar affected him, from a definitely higher plane, which implied veneration on his side and a certain protective authority on theirs. With the facts of real life they had nothing whatever to do. Real life had to do with his pony, his dogs, his toys — rather shame-facedly now that he was more than twelve — and his old Ukrainian nurse. In fine, he had no human feeling for his father at all. That was not surprising, because Ivan Konski was singularly lacking in conventional paternal sentiments, to the extent of setting eyes on his son as seldom as he possibly could. So it is even less surprising that Michael should have neither known nor suspected anything of the facts of his father's existence, which made him one of the favourite subjects of gossip for the drawing-rooms of Saint Petersburg.

Of course, that he should become aware of those facts in the passing of the years was from the very nature of things inevitable. The knowledge, controlled by and filtered through his mother's love and tact, would of itself have done him little or no harm, beyond causing him a little mild social discomfort. The crisis was caused and precipitated alike by that mother's death.

It is impossible to compute how much Ivan Konski owed to his wife. It is difficult to admit that he was as unconscious of the debt as he allowed it to appear. Socially the Russians are a people both hospitable and easy-going. But in spite of the Government policy of attempting to 'russianise' amenable Poles of good family after the rebellion of 1863, the hostesses of the capital were not too eager to second the efforts of the Foreign Office in the matter. John Konski, for all that he might rechristen himself 'Ivan,' abjure his Polish blood, accept back his family estate from a Government that had executed his father as a rebel, and line his pockets with Russian gold, found Saint Petersburg unsympathetic to his claims for social recognition. Novikoff, made a colonel for his services in the Polish fighting, did what he could for him, for the dragoon preserved a sentimental memory of old Stanislas Konski, which he chose to pay for in services to his son. But Novikoff and the Russian Foreign Office combined had reached the end of their abilities once Ivan had got his estate, his subsidy, and a commission in the Chevaliers Gardes. For the rest he had to fend and find for himself. And it is probable that Ivan would have been forced to retire to the castle on the Niemén, and all its company of ghosts and memories, had he not met Anastasia Sergeievna, and had she not pitied him to the extent of marrying him.

Anastasia Sergeievna was the daughter of a cer-

tain General Dubov, a former officer of the Imperial Guard, who held one of the many sinecure positions of the Court. He was seventy-two, perfectly bald, immensely wealthy, and a great favourite of the Tsar. His daughter was a great disappointment to him in many ways. To begin with, she was dark-haired with an ivory-white skin, while he preferred blondes to the extent of keeping simultaneously three German mistresses. In addition she was religious, and detested cynicism. The old general, who had a reputation for cynical wit, said that she had no sense of humour, and poked fun at her for keeping a Bible beside her bed. His shafts had no effect upon her at all — and that irritated him in her more than anything else. He chose to take a liking to Ivan Konski, because to do so annoyed a good many people he wanted to annoy, and also because Ivan was so incredibly more Russian than any Russian. Such an attitude in the son of an executed Pole tickled General Dubov's sense of humour. He disliked Poles.

It was, therefore, entirely the General's fault that Ivan met Anastasia. Which no doubt accounted for the fact that when his daughter announced his intention of marrying Ivan, General Dubov nearly had an apoplectic seizure. His attitude to the couple was hostile almost to the point of petitioning the Emperor to exile Ivan to Persia or the Caucasus. But the point was never quite reached. And it was only

typical that, as soon as he realised that his son-in-law was making his daughter extremely unhappy, he grew more than cordial again to Ivan, and rubbed his hands together over a deplorable condition of affairs, which he said he had prophesied from the beginning.

Very occasionally in the years that followed her marriage it crept into Anastasia's mind to ask herself why she had married Ivan Konski. But she was a fundamentally honest person, and she knew the answer too well to waste time in regrets or in the invention of some tradition which might enhalo her with that type of martyrdom which is as dear to some women as a hot-water bottle is to others. She had been sorry for Ivan Konski. That was all there was to it. She was lovely, popular, rich. She had many friends, more suitors. A successful marriage had been the obvious crown of her career from the moment when she had been old enough to consider such things. Perhaps it was too obvious. Perhaps she subconsciously revolted from that final satisfaction of her father's philosophy. Perhaps she simply felt that she couldn't bear to see Ivan Konski slinking rather miserably and helplessly at her heels; not because he loved her, but because she was ordinarily kind and polite to him. With her own popularity and her father's position, she knew perfectly well that marriage with her would open every door in Saint Petersburg at which he might choose to knock.

Married to her he would be able to hold his head up among his brother officers in the Guards. She knew she could do everything for him which he could never do for himself. And it is a great temptation to be put in a situation where even momentarily one can behave like God. . . .

She married Ivan Konski. The latter, perhaps inevitably, thought that he had played the traditional rôle of the ugly duckling; imagined himself loved for himself alone; threw off the pathetic inadequacies which had trapped Anastasia's sympathy, and exchanged weakness for braggadocio. His attempt to carry things off with the high hand would probably have failed in the ordinary course of events. For though his wife was a good woman, she had the virtues of steel. Unhappily, after eighteen months of married life, she bore Ivan a son. She nearly died, and only survived for thirteen years as a tragically helpless invalid. To Michael, her son, she could never be more than a thin face among piled pillows in a darkened room, terribly tenacious arms, and a whisper. For Ivan she simply ceased to exist. She had served her turn. He was busily engaged in serving his, and he held no place for an invalid wife — who, after all, found perfect consolation in her Bible, so she always insisted — or indeed, for a small boy, anyhow undesired, whose birth had robbed his father of his mother's social services.

The evening after his wife's funeral found Ivan

Konski sitting before his fire in very tolerable contentment. It is only fair to him to attribute the greater part of that somewhat inappropriate contentment to the bottle of Napoleon brandy that stood at his elbow. At the same time — for Ivan Konski grew more honest with himself as he grew drunk — he would have admitted that his shoulders felt the lighter for his wife's death. People had somehow declined to forget her existence; had asked after her with tiresome reiteration; had sometimes been uncharitable about his open infidelities to her — as if — God in heaven! — as if a man could be expected to remain faithful to a bedridden woman! And there had been those dreary visits to that darkened room; the pinched white face with the unnaturally large eyes, which always haunted him for hours afterwards; and her invariable questions about that infernal boy, who seemed to matter to her though she might practically never see him. He felt a little sorrow in a maudlin way, remembering her beauty which he had only been able to enjoy so short a time. But for the most part he was content, as he sprawled back in his chair, and sipped his brandy slowly, savouring its creamy delicacy to the uttermost.

It was a vast gloomy room, furnished with a heavy luxury that gave an uncomfortable impression of too much gilding and brocade, too many chairs, too many vases of malachite and alabaster. Beneath Ivan's feet was stretched a magnificent skin of a po-

lar bear; above his head was an immense chandelier, in which five or six candles burned with a soft flickering glow that did not so much light the room as people it with shadows. Sitting there alone Ivan Konski was anything but an impressive figure of a man. Not even the full-dress splendours of the Chevaliers Gardes could give him the height and dignity which his squat figure and thick neck lacked so sorely. And in the great room he seemed almost dwarf-like, sunk in the chair.

Turning to refill his glass he became suddenly aware that he was not alone. He had not heard the door open, but though he blinked twice, as though mistrusting the evidence of his eyes, he realised that it was his son who was standing just inside the threshold, fidgeting from one foot to the other.

Ivan splashed the brandy into his glass.

'What do you want?' he demanded. 'You ought to be in bed.'

'I don't know where Anya is,' said Michael.

His voice sounded very small and shrill. The truth about the funeral of his mother had not been explained to him, and he was not to know that Anya his nurse was engaged with the other servants in a mourning feast for their dead mistress.

'Anya is busy to-night,' said his father impatiently. 'Surely you are old enough to go to bed alone.'

The boy did not move. He had his mother's white

skin and black hair, and looked very thin and pale in the candle-light.

‘Why do they call you a Pole, father?’ he said suddenly.

Ivan started violently in his chair, spilling brandy over his fingers and onto the bearskin rug.

‘What the devil are you talking about, boy?’ he stammered.

Michael moved a few steps nearer to his father, looking scared but oddly determined.

‘I was on the stairs yesterday, father, and there were some officers in the hall. They saw me, and one of them gave me some sweets. And one of the others said, “You’d hardly think his father was ‘the Pole,’ would you? He’s his mother all over.” You’re not a Pole, are you, father?’

Ivan gulped down more brandy, and attempted jocularly.

‘Are you trying to show me that you’re grown up, Michael? You’re very curious all of a sudden. And what do you know of the Poles and Poland?’

‘I read history, father,’ said Michael seriously. ‘Russia and Poland have always been enemies, haven’t they?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Then what did that officer mean?’

‘God knows, boy. Go to bed!’

‘But, father, I want to know.’

‘Do as you’re told — go to bed!’ snapped Ivan.

Michael half turned. Then another phrase flashed into his mind, that had risen above the laughter of that cloaked and spurred group of officers in the hall the day before: something about 'that poor devil Stanislas Konski' . . .

'Father,' said Michael, 'what happened to Stanislas Konski? Who was he?'

At the mention of his father's name Ivan Konski sprang to his feet, his face contorted like that of a devil. He was half drunk. He had been in secret a drinker for years to help himself to blur, to twist, to deny, to forget the accusation which now started out at him through his son's lips, in his son's treble voice. To him it was as though he was faced, not by a frightened boy of thirteen who did not know what he said, but by a tall old man with a grey face splashed with mud, and indomitable weary eyes. He was faced by the ghost of Stanislas Konski, as he had seen him last on the steps of his castle, facing a Russian firing-party. And in that ghost's eyes he read his own condemnation for all those years of disgraceful ease during which he had worn the Tsar's uniform and taken his pay; for his Russian marriage, which had poured Russian blood into the veins of Stanislas Konski's grandson. With his son's two innocent questions Ivan Konski faced all the terrors of the last Judgment, and knew himself in hell.

Ever since his marriage he had congratulated himself on his success in having laid that inexorable

ghost. Anastasia had enabled him to walk abroad careless of whisperers who spoke of him scornfully as 'the Pole,' and of the old women who enlivened their parties with the exaggerated tale of how he had betrayed old Stanislas to save his own life. The scandal had made old bones and been forgotten save as a tradition. Ivan had survived it, and in surviving had thought that he had convinced himself that after all he was hardly to blame, if at all. Why, Stanislas himself had absolved him of the guilt of his death! But now, as though no longer held back by Anastasia's gentle fingers, the phantom had risen with her death and gripped him by the throat. Guilty of his father's murder — no. But guilty of sloth, of fathomless treason to Poland, of cowardice, of sensuality, drunkenness, and lechery — yes, a thousand times yes.

And as Michael, appalled by the look in his father's eyes, the grinning misery in his features, cowered away from him, Ivan Konski thrust out a shaking hand, and gripped him by the collar. 'I will tell you what you want to know,' he said hoarsely.

'You're hurting me, father,' cried the boy, writhing in his grasp.

Ivan took no notice. To be just to him, he had no idea how near he was to strangling his son with his convulsive fingers. In broken stuttered phrases he poured out the story which he had kept hidden in his heart so long; so long that it had festered, and gone bad and rotten.

To Michael it came as though through a veil. He was frightened to death, his ears were buzzing, and his father's heavy breathing reeked of brandy. Yet it was none the less vivid for that. In spite of the cruel grip about his throat he could see it all: the cold splendour of the night; the mass of the castle against the stars; the torches of the squadron; Novikoff's hand blotting out the sky; and always in the middle of the picture the iron-grey figure of old Stanislas, deserted, dying, and alone, contemptuous of death, as he had been self-sufficient in life. His grandfather! And it was his father, Ivan, who had failed that old man, guided his murderers to his door, eaten their salt, and accepted their favours. Why, he even wore their uniform! The cruelly clear perception of youth, which is blunted neither by proportion nor humour, pilloried his father out of his own mouth there before him as a coward, a traitor, a weakling. . . .

Michael tore himself out of Ivan Konski's grip and faced his father almost snarling. Tears of rage poured down his cheeks. Ivan's stammerings and oaths died away. His hands fell limply to his sides. Mechanically he picked up the brandy-bottle.

'Go to bed,' he muttered thickly.

Michael looked at him, biting his lips. His father would not face his steady gaze. As Ivan put down the bottle, he heard the door close.

Most of that night Michael cried in Anya's arms, but got no comfort from that. He had grown up.

CHAPTER II

MAKINGS OF MICHAEL

THE results of that — to a small boy — terrifying scene with his father on the evening of Anastasia Sergeievna's funeral were sufficiently comprehensive. But they did not develop along the lines which might have been expected. The flare of loathing for Russia and all things Russian, which had been kindled in Michael by the sudden vision of his father's cowardice and treachery, might have, in the normal course of events would have, come to burn with a steady flame. Two things combined to damp the fire. The first was Ivan Konski's immediate departure from Saint Petersburg. The second was the fact that in Michael's veins the Russian blood of his mother ran with a pride and strength which the thin Polish blood inherited from Ivan could hardly dilute, still less subdue. The fire once damped, it was left with appropriate iron to old General Dubov to extinguish it once and for all.

It was merely typical of the old general that his apparent liking for Ivan Konski should have been buried in his daughter's grave. Anastasia Sergeievna once dead, he forgot that she had never laughed at his jokes, appreciated his Parisian stories, or forgiven his German mistresses. He began to remember, and

to think exclusively of, an attractively grave little girl with long plaits, and longer legs, of whom he had been in his own cynically selfish way exceedingly fond. It was that little girl whom Ivan Konski had made so horribly unhappy; who had been rendered an invalid in bearing Ivan Konski's child. General Dubov decided that Ivan Konski was a bit of a blackguard. And as he thought more and more sentimentally of his daughter as a child, he became more and more convinced that Ivan Konski was a Polish renegade, a drunkard, a fool, a liar, and a swine.

Therefore, when Ivan Konski called upon him the morning after Anastasia Sergeievna's funeral, with the signs of a recent debauch obvious in his blotched face and shaky hands, General Dubov did not mince his language. By and large, he was both offensive and cruelly unfair. Ivan Konski hardly seemed to hear what his father-in-law said. In the whole course of the interview, which lasted about an hour, he never once looked him in the face. He merely stood in front of the General, twisting one of the buttons on his coat, and occasionally moistening his lips with his tongue, until the old man had exhausted the bitterness of his invective. Then he spoke as if to the carpet.

'I am going away this morning,' said Ivan Konski slowly. 'I have sent in my papers.'

The General stared, and passed his hand over the

top of his shining bald head, as was his habit when puzzled.

'I want to ask you to do something for me,' Ivan went on. 'I want you to look after my son. I am not coming back to Saint Petersburg. The expense would, of course, be my affair.'

Again General Dubov passed his hand over his head.

'By God, but you're cool!' he exploded at last.

At that Ivan smiled not very pleasantly.

'A characteristic of the dead, so they tell me,' he said. 'Will you look after Michael? I would not ask you but for the fact that he is far more his mother's son than mine.'

And he added more to himself than to the General:

'I would not like to fail him as I failed her.'

The old man took one or two turns up and down the room before he spoke again. The brat was tarred with Ivan Konski's brush, and would be the devil's own nuisance in all kinds of ways. . . . Ivan Konski ought to look after his own affairs instead of shifting them onto the shoulders of his elders and betters. . . . Rat! But his sentimental side was still uppermost. The boy was his daughter's child after all . . . more hers than Ivan's . . . and a tough, plucky little chap, who loved a pony and a dog, and could take a toss without blubbering. . . . He picked up Anastasia's portrait and stared at it for a moment or two, his eyes filmed with senile tears.

'If I take the boy,' he said, turning back to Ivan, 'I must have him altogether — you understand?'

'Of course. That is what I should like.'

'And I have the only say in his upbringing. He will go into the Corps des Pages, and finally the Guard Cossacks.'

Ivan winced.

'I leave him entirely in your hands, General,' he said.

'Very well. Where the devil are you running to, by the way?'

Ivan's restless fingers shifted to his collar as though it chafed his neck.

'I haven't the slightest idea,' he said.

His back straightened, as though his shoulders had been relieved of some heavy burden. His heels clicked together. He bowed.

'I am infinitely grateful to you, General.'

For one moment General Dubov's imagination, that had been in cold storage beneath layers of ceremonial, boredom, and acquired cynicism, came to life. He imagined Ivan Konski, a pistol loaded in one chamber in his pocket, going out into the wilderness of Russia like some hurt animal to die. He took a step forward and began to lift his hand. Then he realised that Ivan Konski had already turned his back and was almost at the door. To call him back would be troublesome, and a little absurd . . . besides he did not really like Ivan Konski . . . and

never had . . . no. The door closed, and General Dubov's hand dropped again to his side.

It is only fair to add that General Dubov was in the event justified for the denial of his romantic and sentimental impulse to stop Ivan Konski from suicide. Certainly the idea of killing himself had crossed Ivan Konski's mind. It crossed it frequently after half a dozen glasses of brandy. But, though he left Saint Petersburg, threw up his commission, and never saw either his father-in-law or his son again, Ivan did not kill himself. He lived to a ripe if somewhat squalid old age in Breslau, succeeding with the proverbial luck of the unrighteous in altogether submerging his remorse and his memories in drink.

General Dubov never knew, for he never cared sufficiently to bother to find out, whether Ivan Konski killed himself or not. Dead or alive, Ivan disappeared, and was no more seen in Russia. The General prided himself on a materialism that took no account of the unseen. He turned his attention to Michael, his grandson, and allowed his old age the supreme indulgence of the gradual corruption of an intelligent small boy's mind. Two things tempted him. The first was Michael's astonishing naïveté: the boy believed everything he was told, and the evidence of his own senses besides. He was altogether healthily pagan, even to his religion, which was merely a compound of the Ukrainian superstitions of old Anya. The second was a slight hostility in

Michael to his grandfather in particular, and apparently to Russia in general. This both puzzled and fascinated the General. It made the boy a problem to solve instead of a responsibility to shoulder.

The explanation of this odd hostility — the last meeting between Michael and his father — was never to be made. Frankly Michael had been shocked and frightened to the very depths of his being. The episode was locked away in his heart among his childish tabus. He was infinitely relieved by his father's disappearance, which implied an easy burial for such a skeleton. But the emotional hostility remained to whet his grandfather's curiosity, and stir in the old man a desire to overpower such an influence with his own.

Of course the boy had no chance. He was taken from Anya. His visits to the Polish estate were strictly interdicted. He was put under a succession of military tutors until he was of an age to enter the Corps des Pages — and he saw his grandfather every day. Slowly, but surely and remorselessly, he was trained in the weary Byzantine tradition of the Russian Court and the second-hand Prussianism of the Russian Army. That one evening the ghost of old Stanislas had called to his Polish blood a summons as thrilling as a bugle-call. But in the weeks and years of evenings that turned the boy into a young man that clarion was drowned beneath a flood of routine orders, ceremonials, amusements,

and companions, all appealing to the Russian strain in him with multitudinous whisperings, suggestions, and arguments that would not be denied.

Most potent of all was the voice of his grandfather ever at his elbow. General Dubov wrought well when he opened his campaign with the destruction of that personal antagonism which he had sensed in Michael. There are many ways in which the heart and the admiration of a small boy may be won. But the surest, and that taken by the General, is never to treat him as a small boy.

‘Youth,’ the old man would say, ‘is no excuse, though it may be an explanation. Despise excuses, and never explain if you can help it. There is only one comprehensive rule of life, which I learned from an old friend of mine years ago in France, the Vi-comte de Puitsange. It is the motto of his family, and as the family traces its descent back to the oldest legends of Poictesme, it is natural that it should have learned something about life. “Do not offend against the notions of your neighbours.” To which, my dear boy, I would only add — “at least, not openly.”’

He grinned toothlessly at Michael’s serious young face. He was glad that the boy showed promise of being more than usually handsome.

This treatment, as of one man of the world to another, was not slow to secure Michael’s attachment. He became, in fact, really fond of the old general, ad-

miring his resolute refusal to die, or even to give up any of the pleasures of life which he had enjoyed so long. That he was bald, toothless, addicted to strong perfumes, mattered nothing beside the fact that to Michael he was consistently charming, and among people who mattered in Saint Petersburg he was generally esteemed. It was hardly to be wondered at that in an atmosphere of cynical materialism, whose idols were Pleasure, Power, Money, and the Tsardom — as the begetter of the first three — there was no place even for the memory of old Polish bones. General Dubov never knew that his fight had been waged against the phantom of old Stanislas facing a Russian firing-party. He had believed that the opposing strain in the boy came from Ivan's bad blood. But his ignorance made no matter. The ghost was laid.

He was aided, too, to a degree which he hardly suspected, by the fortuitous circumstance that Michael was naturally both a sensualist and a soldier. By this I would not imply that he lusted after bloodshed and women. But he was acutely sensitive to the pleasures of the flesh. He loved colour, and music, and riding. He was an athlete without being a boor, a drinker without being a drunkard. Naturally very physical, he was encouraged to express himself physically, and found it very good. On the temperament of the student or the creative artist, General Dubov might have laboured in vain to

grave the emended motto of the Vicomte de Puy-sange. As it was, he had merely to express in words what was already subconsciously Michael's material gospel.

Further, Michael adored his profession of arms. As a boy he had manœuvred vast armies of lead and tin across his nursery floor, fighting the Seven Years' War and the Campaign of 1812 over again with the aid of the maps in his history books; and advancing from that to the setting to himself of tactical problems, and the invention of a childish Kriegsspiel which he would play with his friends with an almost terrifying degree of concentration, absorption, and excitement. This interest in the art of war, added to a vanity which adored a brilliant uniform and a delight in riding and fencing, meant everything to him in the circumstances in which his career was set. The General liked the evidence of brains. His comrades forgave his interest in his profession in their admiration for his brilliancy with horse and sabre. And what had a promising young officer in the Imperial Bodyguard to do with the memory of an executed rebel? General Dubov had certainly been fortunate in his material. He might well rub his hands over the completed work, and feel that he had not laboured in vain for the sake of Anastasia Sergeievna's memory, as he liked to pretend to himself.

Even so, there was one moment when General

Dubov came within a very little of failure. That moment came a few months after Michael Konski's nineteenth birthday, and the cause of the trouble — of course, as the General would observe afterwards with a sniff in talking of the matter — was a woman.

Michael had needed no encouragement to sow his wild oats in the manner proper to the average wealthy and well-born Russian cavalry subaltern. According to that manner he had lost no time in entering upon various slight affairs with young women of attractive appearance and no morals whatsoever — ballet dancers, gipsy singers; in short, the conventional routine of adolescent dissipation. In his circumstances this routine went without saying. It meant as much and as little as his occasional drinking bouts with the other members of his mess. And that degree of significance can be appreciated when it is realised that a Grand Duke saw nothing curious in deliberately attempting to intoxicate the officers of a foreign cavalry regiment when they were the guests of his mess. General Dubov, in fact, would have been not only astonished, but shocked, had young Michael shown any disposition to chastity of living. But 'shock' would be a very mild word to express the effect upon the old man's nerves when his grandson walked calmly into his room one morning and stated his intention of getting married almost at once. But he knew the result of mere mulish opposition to the intentions of the young, so he controlled

himself with difficulty, and lighting a cigar concealed the anxiety in his features behind a cloud of smoke.

'Why do you propose such a step?' he asked.

'Why not?' returned Michael blithely. 'I believe I have plenty of money.'

'True. And marriages are made in settlements, eh?'

Michael smiled. He was always perfectly at ease with his grandfather.

'What about your career? A married subaltern is a curse to any colonel.'

'I had not thought of it as an actual aid to speedy promotion,' grinned Michael.

The General struck the arm of his chair smartly.

'Don't be a fool — and don't try to treat me like one!' he snapped. 'May I ask for the details of this business?'

Michael's hand went for a moment to his tight collar. Why he should find it difficult to explain this extremely ordinary matter to his grandfather, his ideal of an understanding man of the world, he did not know. He could not appreciate that in him for the first time the gentle, chivalrous spirit of his mother was uppermost. Nor could he know that it was her gentleness which in her lifetime had particularly annoyed her father.

'Come along,' said the General, not unkindly. 'I suppose you've made a fool of yourself somehow.'

Are you infatuated — I mean, of course, are you in love?’

That much was easy, thought Michael.

‘No,’ he said quickly.

General Dubov blew his nose.

‘Thank God for that, at least!’ he exclaimed.

‘Well?’

With a little nervous movement of his shoulders Michael began to explain. Some three months earlier he had in his casual, light-hearted way blundered into an affair with a girl older than himself by some six years. He admitted that she had fascinated him completely. For a little he had been frankly infatuated with her. And it was not as if she were a ballet girl or fille de joie by any other name. She belonged to some good bourgeois Moscow family, with whom she had quarrelled, so she said. Part of the attraction, no doubt, had consisted in the discovery of a girl of his own class living alone and attainable in an entirely unconventional manner. No doubt the affair would have run a romantic course to a hyper-sentimental conclusion. But one hot summer night a late supper on one of the islands of the Neva, a good deal of champagne, a full moon, a gipsy orchestra, and sheer proximity had resulted in a mutual losing of heads. They spent that night together. As so often in the case of calf-love, for it was no more, fleshly attainment killed romance. And with its romance the affair automatically ended,

from Michael's point of view. The whole thing, he insisted, was simply a stupid mistake. He had been a damned young fool. He was damned sorry about it. So much for Michael's personal point of view. But there was the girl's. And when Michael began to explain how he saw the girl's point of view, General Dubov's eyebrows rose in a manner positively alarming.

Apparently the girl's feelings had been anything but changed by the substitution of the flesh for the spirit. On the contrary, they had been intensified. Michael had preferred to acquiesce in the desires of his mistress rather than quarrel with someone whom he continued to like, though he loved her no longer. And now, it seemed, she thought she was going to have a child. Michael here shrugged his shoulders.

'So I must marry her,' he concluded stiffly, for his grandfather's expression was not exactly encouraging. 'That's all.'

General Dubov laid his cigar with great exactitude in a small bowl of green china.

'Sit down, Michael,' he said. 'And kindly listen to me. You're an idiot! But it's no use my telling you so, for I think you know it already, and if I emphasise the point you may prefer out of natural contrariness to believe yourself rather a fine fellow.'

Michael nodded. Dispassionately he admired the way in which the old man read him as easily and casually as a newspaper.

'Very well,' continued the General. 'We will let your folly pass. Is this marriage your idea or the lady's?'

'She spoke of it first,' admitted Michael.

'Quite so. And this "moment of passion" occurred when?'

'A little over three months ago.'

'Ah, yes. Well, my dear boy, this is the affair in a nutshell. You are not in love any more. The lady is without social advantages. Therefore on your side there is no reason for marriage. Further, I can assure you, from a certain experience, that this early certainty on the subject of future offspring from an indiscretion is almost certain proof that it is entirely hypothetical. Of course, the lady wants to be married. You're a catch, you know, and she seems to be lacking in — shall I say, background?'

Michael sat up very straight in his chair.

'Are you proposing that I leave her in the lurch?' he demanded.

General Dubov waved a thin, protesting hand.

'Not in the least. Nor do I recommend you the bêtise of offering her money. I merely say, Wait a little. It can do no harm. Make certain.'

Michael frowned and bit his lips.

'There is no need to worry, my dear boy. You can marry as soon as you are convinced of the necessity. But frankly I do not see the elements of a successful marriage. And the necessity may not exist.'

I presume you told me the truth when you say that you both lost your heads.'

'I don't lie to you, sir,' said Michael.

'I know. And she is older than you? Yes, I think you can very safely wait a little longer. Will you trust me so far, Michael?'

'Yes,' said Michael.

And when he had gone away, the General picked up his cigar again, relighted it carefully, and blew several huge smoke-rings in sheer puerile relief. For it had been a close thing. How near only he, with his knowledge of his daughter so long dead, knew. But he had pulled it off. He could sleep in peace now. Michael was inoculated against chivalry by common-sense.

Of course he was justified in the event. The hypothetical baby could not be materialised. The bourgeois Moscow family was discovered by the General's industry to be non-existent — he had always taken care to be on good terms with the Okhrana authorities. Further, the girl proved not insensible to the attractions of a round sum down to move from Saint Petersburg leaving no address. General Dubov felt it was one of his good investments; and like the rest of his investments kept it a secret from his grandson. Michael breathed more freely, and determined to profit by experience. Everything, in fine, was most satisfactory.

It was so satisfactory that General Dubov con-

cluded that he could choose no better moment to leave the world a little better for his presence upon it. So he died with his habitual quiet dignity, leaving, as he believed, Michael Konski armoured against all the changes and chances of mortal life. Michael always regarded his memory with real affection. But if General Dubov had let Anastasia Sergeievna's influence have its way even to the extent of making her son marry a loose woman older than himself, he would have thereby prevented sorrow beyond computation, and probably saved more than one life.

No doubt, from beyond the grave, he regarded the bringing to nought of his efforts with celestial equanimity. For if he had not succeeded in helping Michael to live, he had done much towards teaching him how to die.

CHAPTER III

JADWIGA COMPROMISES

IT is probably true that Ivan Konski's ultimate downfall was decided before he ever went to Saint Petersburg for the first time with Novikoff's roubles and letters of introduction in his pocket. And to some extent Ivan was the victim of cruel circumstance, for the incident that kicked the beam finally against him was outside his control. It took place at a small military post on the Prussian frontier about two hours after the shooting of Stanislas Konski.

When Stanislas left his daughter to the care of Josef Skulski, his cousin, he had disguised his dislike of Josef neither from Josef nor from himself. He acted because he had no alternative, and because he believed, in spite of all his instincts, that Josef was trustworthy and a man of common-sense. He had failed to take Josef's Jewish blood into consideration. He had been only too aware of Josef's disapproval of the futile gesture of the '63 rising. But he had never imagined that Josef could combine with his disapproval the firm intention to make money out of the rising if he could. Stanislas Konski's opinion of his cousin might have been revised if he had known that Josef Skulski had been engaged in a secret ammunition traffic across the

Prussian frontier. It would have been revised still further if he had known the amount of the profit which Josef had made out of Polish patriots whose need of ammunition was considerably greater than their business acumen.

However, Stanislas's dislike of his cousin was such that the latter's profiteering from his country's agony would have done little but increase the contempt in which he normally held him. What Stanislas would have found it difficult to believe was that Josef should fail in the common-sense details of his operations. Yet this is exactly what Josef did. Though his profits were large, he resented the expenses incurred in the process of trafficking in contraband. He cut them down. And he made the fatal mistake of cutting down those that were most essential. He tried to reduce the amount of his bribes to the Prussian official in charge of the section of frontier where he was operating. The Prussian, seeing that the end of the rising was in sight, and realising that once it was over there would be no more money, whether in large or small quantities, to be made out of Josef, and irritated by Josef's haggling, suddenly remembered his duty. He laid the matter before his superiors, omitting his own share therein. Of this contretemps Josef knew nothing. Therefore it was to his former accomplice's frontier post that he drove with Jadwiga when he left the castle of Konski.

Arrived at the frontier, Josef halted the carriage and asked a sleepy sentry if Herr Kapp could see him. In a few moments the reply came back that Herr Kapp was most anxious to see Josef Skulski. Josef got out of the carriage, giving the reins to Jadwiga, and disappeared in the darkness towards a house where a single lighted window shone. He never came back. Jadwiga never saw him or heard of him again. In fact, he was put under arrest and handed over to the Russian authorities with von Bismarck's compliments. His trip to the Prussian frontier only ended in Siberia. But as far as Jadwiga was concerned, he might as well have vanished into thin air.

Muffled in her furs, Jadwiga sat waiting in the carriage till the stars began to pale. Exhausted by the natural reaction from the events of the night, she even slept a little. Then she realised that something was wrong. She attacked sentries with enquiries, but they had been changed since her arrival, and expressed complete ignorance. Then she went to the house where she had seen the light in the window. She was told that Herr Kapp was in bed and asleep. Her stiff reply that she could wait till he woke up made an impression on a servant who realised that he was not dealing with the average perfect fool of a young girl. In ten minutes Jadwiga was interviewing Herr Kapp, who gave no hint of having been hastily roused from his bed. He looked far

more as if he had been up all night. This Jadwiga told him. Herr Kapp laughed. He was in a very good humour, having settled with Josef Skulski and won a good mark from his superiors at the same time. He offered Jadwiga breakfast. She accepted it gratefully enough, but showed no disposition to small-talk. Herr Kapp talked lightly of this and that. Jadwiga only ate, asking at intervals for news of Josef Skulski.

Forced at long last to consider the question of Josef, Herr Kapp became admittedly evasive. He knew Josef Skulski, that he could not deny. He had seen him that night, but only for a moment. No, there had been no question about passports raised. A pleasant man, Josef Skulski, and what a business head! Yes, Herr Kapp had had certain business dealings with Josef. What had befallen Josef after he had left Herr Kapp's room, Herr Kapp frankly asserted that he had not the least idea. His sentries were trustworthy, and not in the least likely to rob an inoffensive traveller. Jadwiga had seen no sign of any disturbance from her carriage? There were only four hundred yards between the carriage and the house. Herr Kapp agreed that it was all very mysterious, and poured out another cup of coffee for his guest.

Now Jadwiga, as I have said, was no fool. And her wits were not blunted by any emotional disturbance, since she had not the least affection for

Josef Skulski. She had shared her father's dislike of his cousin. She realised soon enough that Skulski was in some sort of trouble, presumably with the Prussian authorities, and that Kapp would tell her nothing of what he knew. She was therefore left to her own devices. What should she do? It was a hard question to answer. She had plenty of courage, but to drive back into Poland, while the country was infested with Polish fugitives, Russian patrols, desperate men of every kidney, would be the act of a fool. On the other hand, she knew hardly a soul abroad, and she was extremely short of money. Josef Skulski, not unnaturally, had held the money-bags of the expedition. Jadwiga finished her coffee, and put her elbows decisively on the table.

'Herr Kapp,' she said, 'I would like a truthful answer to this question. I do not think you are a cruel man, and you must realise that this is a matter of some importance to me. If I wait here, will Josef Skulski return?'

The Prussian's eyes dropped. He played with his knife for a little, then looked up.

'He will not,' he said at last.

'Thank you,' said Jadwiga. 'That is kind of you. For that and for your hospitality I am more than grateful. May I treat you as a friend, and ask your advice?'

Herr Kapp looked uneasy, and ran a hand through his fair hair.

'You were a friend of Josef Skulski's?' persisted Jadwiga.

'No,' said the Prussian firmly.

'A business acquaintance then?'

'That, yes.'

'Very well, Herr Kapp. Merely as a matter of business, what shall I do?'

Herr Kapp began to fidget in his chair. He was beginning to get bored with this girl who stuck to her points so desperately, and who was not even pretty. Besides he was sleepy.

'If you will tell me how I can serve you ——?' he began lazily.

Jadwiga leapt upon the words like a panther.

'You can serve me by helping me as far as Berlin,' she snapped.

'The devil!' gasped the Prussian.

'Will you do that for me?'

'I cannot say at once — it is against official regulations — you have no passport — you may be a Polish spy ——' He broke off, floundering under the contempt in the girl's grey eyes.

'Will you do it?' repeated Jadwiga.

Herr Kapp blinked wearily. Bed was really becoming a necessity . . . after all the girl must go somewhere . . . he was responsible for her companion's disappearance, for her being left in the lurch . . . she must be got rid of somehow. . . .

'I will do it,' he said, and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Thank you,’ said Jadwiga, and smiled. ‘Before you go to bed, Herr Kapp, will you make me out the necessary papers?’

The final result of Jadwiga’s persistence, and of Herr Kapp’s increasing desire for sleep, was that she left him the same morning for Berlin with a complete set of papers, a passport, and a considerable loan. On arriving in the Prussian capital she made her way to the British Embassy, and asked if Colonel Aire would see her.

The recollection of the English colonel had come to Jadwiga at the frontier post almost as an inspiration. Jadwiga, who was a stern Catholic, put it down to the intervention of her patron saint. Colonel Aire had visited Stanislas Konski two years earlier. He had served with some distinction in the Crimean War, and on being appointed military attaché in Berlin he had been curious to see something more of Russia than had been possible from the trenches before Sebastopol. To his insular mind there was nothing to choose between Poland and Russia, and when a friend of Stanislas Konski’s told him that there was capital shooting to be had in the neighbourhood of the castle, he had been delighted to spend one of his leaves as Stanislas’s guest. The two men had got on curiously well, finding a firm foundation for friendship in a mutual dislike of Russians. The Colonel remembered how the English wounded had been bayoneted on the ground during the fight-

ing at Inkerman. Stanislas had survived the rebellion of 1831, and seen the shooting in the streets of Warsaw. The two men exchanged reminiscences, shot together, drank together. Stanislas could never quite understand how an aristocrat, as Aire undoubtedly was, could be interested in the prosaic details of the commercial possibilities of an estate, as Aire also undoubtedly was in his Yorkshire acres. But he reflected that the English were proverbially insane, and was consoled by the fact that Aire shot even better than he did himself. With Jadwiga also the Colonel got on excellently well. He had a daughter of about her age, and his one weakness was paternal sentiment. He approved of Jadwiga because she was sensible, and did not chatter. She approved of the Colonel because he so obviously preferred her to her brother John. She resented the way in which John managed, as a general rule, to get all the gilding out of life and leave her the gingerbread. For while her digestion was good, she found the diet monotonous. Therefore, she reflected, facing Herr Kapp across his excessively grimy tablecloth, she would seek out Colonel Aire in Berlin and ask him to help her. Of course, it was a sufficiently fantastic thing to do. He might, if he forgot his manners, consign her to the deuce. But Jadwiga did not believe that he would, or could, forget his manners; and, like Stanislas before her, she remembered that the English were mad and might do anything.

Her confidence was justified. Aire was as delighted to see her as he was shocked to hear of what had happened to his friends. Through his drawl there seemed to peer a decision to raise the matter of the abduction of Josef Skulski with the Prussian Government. The repayment of Herr Kapp's loan was, of course, his affair. If Jadwiga would honour him so far his home was at her service for as long as she chose. His term in Prussia was ending within the month. Would Jadwiga go to England with him? Jadwiga most certainly would; and did.

The sequence of events which thus led Jadwiga to Berlin, and ultimately set her en route for England, must have seemed to have little enough to do with the fate and fortunes of Ivan, who had once been John Konski and Jadwiga's brother. But, in fact, it had everything to do with them. If Josef Skulski had not disappeared into a Russian prison, he would no doubt have taken the trouble to discover what had happened to John; in the end he would have seen that the best place for Jadwiga was with her brother in Saint Petersburg. With Jadwiga beside him, John could never have 'russianised' to the extent that he did. Jadwiga might have consented to live in Saint Petersburg from necessity — but only in the manner of an enemy occupying a hostile country. She was Pole to the marrow of her admirable bones; a patriot in a way which is hardly comprehensible to races which have the tradition of conquering. To domi-

nant nations patriotism is only a delightful luxury with appropriate trimmings of bunting and songs. To the Irishman or the Pole it is as vital a necessity as food. It is bred in the bone. Only too often it comes out in blood. Jadwiga had envied her brother his masculinity for years. If she herself could never fight for Poland, she looked forward to bearing a son who should do so one day. Such anticipation was for her axiomatic. That once understood, it is easy to imagine the effect upon her brother if she had been living with him in Saint Petersburg. His unhappiness would have been unqualified. But he would never have dared to assuage it with Russian money or a Russian wife. And Michael Konski would never have been born. But the fates ruled otherwise. Jadwiga went to England with Colonel Aire.

Naturally, the Colonel made enquiries about John Konski. But he had not liked the boy, and the result of his enquiries did not make him like him any better. He found out that John had gone to the Russian capital under Novikoff's protection; and he heard the cruelly exaggerated story of how John had been responsible for betraying his father to the Russian dragoons. He concluded that there was nothing to be gained by bringing brother and sister together again. He felt no inclination to invite John to England; none to send Jadwiga to Russia. Things were better as they were. And as far as he remembered there had been little love lost between the two. He

waited for some sign from Jadwiga that she was unhappy about John. None came. In comparison with the loss of her father, the loss of John meant nothing to Jadwiga.

When Colonel Aire offered practically to adopt Jadwiga, he left one important factor out of consideration. That factor was his wife. His own idea, at the close of his term of service in Prussia, was to retire from the army, and return to the life of a country gentleman in Yorkshire — a life which he loved, and one which Jadwiga was eminently suited to share. But he had been away from his wife so long, first in the Crimea and then in Berlin, that he had not thought of her attitude to such a proceeding. And, as soon as he arrived in London, that attitude was brought to his notice in no uncertain manner.

Constance Aire had not the least intention of burying herself in Yorkshire. As she said, her daughter deserved her chance — her daughter Victoria, aged nineteen. For herself, naturally, Mrs. Aire did not mind where or how she lived. She was getting an old woman. To her one house was as good as another. But for Vicky she would sacrifice her comfort, and really George must do the same. Vicky must have her seasons, her balls, her young men, her chance. Surely Jadwiga, whom, of course, she was delighted to welcome — the more so as she was plain, and no rival to Vicky's English beauty —

would enjoy London more than those dreadful desolate moors. And so on. . . .

George Aire did not agree. But his wife could not be argued with. She was one of those soft women on whom argument has about as much effect as on a feather-bed. And she cried easily. Her nerves were dreadful, she pointed out. She could not bear to squabble about petty little things. George Aire shrugged helplessly. Besides he was very fond of Vicky, who was, indeed, charming and extremely pretty. He took a London house, and made the best of it.

It was as well that he did, for his wife was remorseless. He was not allowed to remain quietly in the background. On the contrary, he was billed as the star attraction of the family. An act of singular gallantry before Sebastopol had made him something of a popular hero, and his name a household word. George Aire was made to regret the rash impulse which had driven him to pick up a live shell from the floor of a trench and throw it clear of the parapet. It had scarred his face for life. Now those very scars were to be advertised on ballroom floors in Belgravia for his wife's, ostensibly his daughter's, benefit. In his opinion the whole performance was deuced bad form. But then women could never be brought to see anything from that point of view. And it was true that he was lionised, in spite of the years that had passed since the Crimea.

George Aire grinned wryly, and bore it. After all, there always remained the Club. Riding in the Row was a mug's game, but it jolted the liver satisfactorily, and Seasons must end some time. And Vicky seemed to be having a success. Constance was satisfied. Things might be worse. He had reached the time of life at which negative quietude is of far more importance than any positive happiness. He felt a little uneasy sometimes when he looked at Jadwiga. He knew that the girl didn't really get on with Constance. She seemed slow at picking up English, and certainly at balls she looked hopelessly out of the picture; so — so dead-set, thought George Aire, fumbling for the right word, and doubting whether he had found it. Not that she ever complained, or showed that she was unhappy. But she was so obviously an Ishmaelite in London, and the Colonel knew that in Yorkshire she would have been perfectly suited and at home. Both at parties and in the Belgrave Square house she would sit perfectly silent and self-contained with a stiff back and an apparently contemptuous expression on her plain little face, which was really due only to the combination of a jutting nose and naturally thin lips. When she spoke, she went straight to the point. When she wanted to do anything, she went and did it sans phrase. To Constance Aire the girl, for all her courtesy, was a terror. She could not begin to place her or understand her. She did not want to. As for

young men, Vicky's young men, they were scared to death of her decisive manner, her clipped sentences, her utter lack of shyness or small-talk. And Jadwiga had no beauty to right the balance against her. With older men, George Aire's Crimean contemporaries in particular, she had something in common. But she met them seldom, and Constance Aire did not encourage such unconventional types of friendship; it was so nice for Jadwiga to have Vicky to go about with, and to see English society at its best and nicest. Of course, it would take time, and Jadwiga would have to learn how to speak English fluently, and how to change her abrupt ways, to become altogether more womanly. But Constance Aire was sure, and said frequently how sure she was, that some day she would see Jadwiga led to the altar by some really eligible young Englishman, who would make every allowance for her queer foreign name. She might rely on the Aires for the provision of a dowry. Constance knew very well what was meant by her duty to her neighbour. . . .

Behind her smooth narrow forehead Jadwiga's brain worked steadily and simply. She loved George Aire, only a little less than she had loved her father. She had looked forward to living in his country home; to learning the quaint English way of hunting foxes with a pack of hounds and the equivalent of a squadron of cavalry. But things were not working out to that delightful conclusion, and showed no

prospect of doing so. And she had not the least hesitation in admitting to herself that to her Vicky was almost, and Constance quite, intolerable. At any rate, in London. A change was imperative. But how was it to be secured? Jadwiga was far too grateful to George Aire to bother him about it. She knew quite well that the result would be that he would either make or find trouble with Constance. Some other method was essential. Jadwiga looked about her and reflected. How did other girls who disliked their surroundings get out of them?

In the sixties there were no mannequins, typists, telephone girls, or film studios to supply an obvious solution. It was still ladylike to do nothing and be proud of it. There only remained marriage, and, for the Victorian young lady, marriage with at least the pretence of romantic trimmings. But Jadwiga was strictly a realist. So much had '63 done for her. She faced the alternatives squarely, and concluded that marriage at its worst could not be so impossible as Constance Aire at her ostentatious best.

Vicky told her mother that at last Jadwiga seemed to be taking an interest in young men. Constance Aire frowned, then laughed.

'If Eustace Ruthven should say anything to me, mamma,' Vicky went on shyly, 'may I tell him to see you?'

Constance Aire patted her daughter's plump white shoulder with affection appropriate to the fact

that Eustace Ruthven was an Honourable, and worth approximately ten thousand a year. Vicky had not disappointed her. And what did Jadwiga's affairs matter after all?

CHAPTER IV

MAKINGS OF LADISLAS

STEPHEN BRUCE was one of those men born out of their proper period. Under Elizabeth he would have been perfectly suited in the rôle of gentleman-adventurer, for he was of the type of wandering Scot who found his occupation in attempting to discover a new route to Cathay and the Indies. In Victorian England in the sixties he was simply an anachronism. He even looked an Elizabethan with his rather narrow brown face and little pointed beard. Being both sensible and comfortably off, he made no effort to cope with an environment where he had no possible place. He left Cambridge at the end of his first year, and wandered off round the world, observing, hunting, and even exploring in an amateurish fashion, taking ultimately to mountain-climbing, which soon ceased to be a pastime and became an altogether absorbing interest. When George Aire met him in his club, and took an immediate fancy to him, he was thirty-one, and looked older: a tall, slow-speaking man, very long in arms and legs, with a far-away look in his blue eyes.

About a week after their first meeting, George Aire brought him home to dinner. For three courses he maintained an almost complete silence, which

raised him in Jadwiga's estimation as completely as it damned him in the eyes of Constance Aire. Then the Colonel succeeded in drawing him out on the subject of an expedition which he was planning to make to South America the next year. He had designs on some of the peaks in the Andes. Jadwiga listened attentively. After dinner, finding himself next to her, and discovering that her English was limited, he delighted her by displaying a command of most fluent French. Constance Aire was horrified, for she shared to the full the modish distrust of and hostility to the Second Empire, and was convinced that the French language could only be used to conceal sentiments of the grossest impropriety. This Stephen Bruce observed to his considerable amusement.

His observation of Jadwiga resulted in very different emotions. No pelican in the wilderness was ever more miserable than was Stephen Bruce in the ordinary drawing-room of Belgravia. The outer defences by which the women of his day seemed to guard their womanhood — for who could believe in a body of flesh and blood behind those monstrous circumferences of whalebone and flounces? — petrified him as surely as if they had worn the Gorgon's Head in addition to their crinolines. He was more at home with Alpine peasants or native carriers. But this Polish girl with her direct gaze and speech, utterly lacking airs and graces, pleased Bruce by

everything in her which had enabled Constance Aire's friends to call her farouche. He liked her firm chin, and her pokerish back, her decision, and even that slightly contemptuous air of hers which Vicky found so exasperating. He strongly appreciated her lack of any conscious sexual allure; that she realised that she was plain, and accepted it without heart-burn, or envy of other girls more fortunate. In short, he liked her immensely, and found her easy to approach. When Constance Aire took it upon herself to oppose his attempts to cultivate his new acquaintance, Jadwiga was vastly assisted in her design. In Bruce's mind she took shape thenceforward as a difficult peak to be scaled — a part of his life's work.

For it must be frankly admitted that from the night of her first meeting with Stephen Bruce, Jadwiga designed that he should marry her. It was no question of a romantic folly of love at first sight. Novels and plays concerning the tender passion had played little part in her upbringing, and physically she was cold. But she had been trained to know a man when she saw one. And in Bruce she saw not only a man, but a man who lived the kind of life she could understand and admire — the kind of life she knew herself fitted to share. Marriage with him would mean a companionship of kindred tastes, of sympathetic mentalities; and would free her for ever from Belgrave Square, and all that that hated neighbourhood implied. Further than that she did

not bother to consider — except that at the back of her mind couched the idea that Stephen Bruce would be no unworthy father for the son she hoped to bear. Not for herself — she lacked maternal feeling — but for Poland.

When, after six weeks of varying success in attempting to see a certain amount of Jadwiga by herself, Stephen at last proposed, he was accepted with such decisive promptitude that he laughed, and charged her with having had designs upon him from the first.

‘Of course, Stephen,’ said Jadwiga. ‘But you want to marry me, is it not so? Do you blame me then for wanting the same thing? Have I been what Mrs. Aire calls “brazen”?’

Stephen put a hand under her chin, turned her face up to his, and kissed her.

‘I think you should be grateful,’ insisted Jadwiga. ‘You are the sort of man who would never marry if he had only himself to rely on.’

‘I am grateful — very,’ said Stephen gravely.

And they went on to talk about South America.

All things considered, Constance Aire accepted her defeat gracefully. She was not, she whispered privately and often to herself — and to one or two very intimate friends — really interested in Jadwiga’s future. The girl was so hopelessly self-contained; had always refused to make friends with her. Besides, there were compensations. She was not

sorry to have Jadwiga off her hands. She unsettled George; encouraged those absurd hankerings of his after a country life. She had been an uncomfortable outré element at parties. It suited her book that she and Stephen Bruce, whom she also could neither understand nor like, should disappear together. Of course, she hoped they would be happy, and remain happy. She was sure that the farther they were from London the happier they would be. . . .

She wept at the wedding, which was a most brilliant and successful function owing to her efforts. Jadwiga lived up to her reputation by facing the altar and the fashionable crush with perfect calm. She was so self-possessed that Stephen, who was petrified with nervousness, could not help laughing a little. After which he felt better. He was not there when Jadwiga came down the staircase after changing out of her wedding-dress, and met George Aire on the landing. For a moment they stood facing each other, without speaking. Jadwiga noticed that the Colonel was beginning to show his age. He was beginning to stoop at the shoulders. The lines on his scarred face had deepened. He looked ten years older than he had in Berlin.

‘I want to say thank you — but it is difficult,’ said Jadwiga at last.

Aire put a hand on her shoulder.

‘Nonsense, my dear. Only too delighted. Liked your father immensely: deuced good fellow. Let me

know how you get along out there, won't you, and if you ever want anything, well you know what I mean — but you won't. Bruce is a fine chap.'

Jadwiga lifted her hand, took Aire's in a firm grip, and swiftly carried it from her shoulder to her lips. He drew it away sharply, but his exclamation died in his throat, for her mouth was quivering, and she was crying. Then characteristically jerking up her head, she ran past him and down the stairs. George Aire looked after her and blew his nose.

So Jadwiga was married and left England. Ten years passed before she returned. They were happy years of the type which has no history; years of wandering, climbing, and good companionship, during which neither she nor Stephen ever felt inclined to regret their bargain, or to go back to the fleshpots of civilisation. Their last link with England seemed to snap when, in the spring of 1869, they heard in Valparaiso of George Aire's death. The echoes of the guns of Sadowa and Sedan were hardly heard across the Atlantic, and of Poland there was no news save that the triple manacles were more firmly about her limbs than ever. Stephen seemed fascinated by and content with South America, and Jadwiga had resigned herself to living out her life under the shadow of the Andes, and a childless life at that. Then in '74 she knew herself at last pregnant, and Stephen surprised her by insisting that they should go 'home.' 'He must be born in Scotland,' he explained, when

Jadwiga pointed out that 'home' in their case was a misleading expression.

For a little Jadwiga resisted. She had hated the long voyage out, and dreaded its repetition in her present state. She had got used to South America. Her memories of the British Isles were vaguely disquieting. She confessed to an absurd presentiment of evil. But in those adventurous years she had grown to love Stephen, and in her love to defer to his judgment, and soften the edge of her own forthright decisions. Besides, she sympathised. In his place she would have crossed the world to have a son born in Poland. She felt that she was setting her own comfort, and a foolish indefensible nervousness, which she heartily despised, against an inalienable right. She said as much to Stephen, who kissed her affectionately as he had done so often before, and went out to book their passages on the next boat.

Yet she was right. In the years that followed she blamed herself for her weakness in yielding — for allowing her love to conquer her instinct. For it seemed as though the kindly fortune that had followed their journeyings in America turned her face from them once they began to recross the ocean to the Old World. It was a bad, stormy voyage, and they made England on a day of wind-racked sable clouds and penetrating drizzle. Stephen, who had successfully fought the elements all his life, literally from China to Peru, at last paid forfeit to the Eng-

lish climate. That day of landing he caught a chill. Insisting on proceeding with the first stage of the journey to the north, he took Jadwiga as far as London. There he was forced to take to his bed. Pneumonia set in, and he was dead in three days.

'So sorry, darling; all my fault,' were his last whispered words. 'You'll look after him for me, won't you? I know you'll do it very much better.'

He died with Jadwiga's hand in his, and a smile on his lips.

Jadwiga was stunned. But she had faced the grim facts of death before, and she held the promise of life within her. For the moment she strangled her grief, set her teeth, and surrendered herself body and soul to the immediate problem of bearing Stephen's son. Till that was accomplished, her sorrow should find no expression. Resolve and achievement were alike worthy of Sparta. But the changing fate had not yet done with her. When the child was born, it was a girl.

This second blow, following so soon upon Stephen's death, went near to turning her brain. Need for resistance to the expression of her feelings had passed. ~~But that expression had been dammed so sternly, so unnaturally, that the removal of the dam caused a flooding almost fatal in its fury. Grief for her husband's loss was ravaging enough in itself. But to that now was added the shattering conviction that she had been cheated, by Nature, by Fate, by~~

God, even by Stephen. She had not desired a child. She had desired a son. When it had seemed that she would never have a child at all, she had submitted without complaint. She had had Stephen then. But now, when Stephen had been snatched from her, when they had both been happy in the conviction that the child would be a boy after all those barren years, that in the event it was a girl was intolerable to her — so cruelly unfair. She moaned and writhed in the solitude of her double bed, for it had been necessary to take the baby from her. She could not feed it, nor even bear to look at it. For weeks she was dangerously ill.

Still the changing fate had not done with her. She longed to die — her nurse was horrified by her strenuous prayers for death in her delirium. But her constitution was naturally of iron, an iron that had been tempered and wrought into steel during the strenuous South American years — Stephen's years. It would not let her die. For once body proved stronger than spirit; or it may have been that subconsciously Jadwiga's spirit played traitor, that her pride and her self-control were too high for the emotionalism that had identified Death with either the blessed peace of eternal nothingness or with Stephen.

She recovered, but she was never quite the same woman. It was as though some essential spring had snapped and proved irreplaceable. She recovered and turned for support to her pride, her self-control,

her common-sense. And these things did not fail her. She wasted no time, no tears, in futile grieving or railing against fate. She set herself simply to cope with the new situation in which she was left. She succeeded. But it was a grim mechanical task, to which she brought everything but her heart. That she could not bring, for it was broken. And as Jadwiga had not had the romantic satisfaction of dying of her broken heart, so she had not the material satisfaction of being able to pick up and patch up the pieces. She did without, and 'did it very well.'

Perhaps it came harder on the child, the unwanted daughter, than on Jadwiga, who had at least the memories of ten good years behind her. Not that Jadwiga was unkind to her. She could no more have been unkind to a child than she could have kicked a cat or thrashed a horse. The only moments in her life of which she was thoroughly ashamed were those in which she had thrust that helpless, ugly, swaddled bundle away from her. She did everything she could to make up for that momentary yielding to hatred and despair. But she could not alter the inexorable fact that her daughter meant no more to her than any other child for whose upbringing and care she might have been left responsible by circumstances. And she was too honest to make any attempt to disguise it — from herself. It made her, not unhappy, since she was beyond happiness or unhappiness, but uncomfortable, and in her own eyes inadequate. It is

easy to imagine the effect on a child. For a child knows nothing of adequacy and cares little for comfort, while the measure of its happiness is the measure of its world.

It was therefore not surprising that Helen — so Jadwiga christened her daughter as if in sentimental memory of her own early devotion to Homer! — grew up repressed, rather unhappy, very lonely; all the more so, because from the first she adored the mother to whom she meant so little. She admired excessively Jadwiga's quiet strength; her 'chilled-steel' pose that had become second nature. She copied these things. But her mother's armour was too heavy and too hard for a girl with neither age nor experience to give her cause to wear it. Helen realised this when it was too late to undo the effects which the wearing of that armour had wrought upon her character and her points of view. She was frightened. With all life before her, she had adapted herself to a model who lived on the principle that life was over and done with. Like Jadwiga in the days when she lived under the roof of Constance Aire, Helen at eighteen found her situation beyond bearing. Like Jadwiga, she saw in early marriage her only chance of escape. But unlike Jadwiga, she chose wrong in the selection of a husband. She married a young officer of the Indian Army called Sale, who was home on leave.

Henry Sale was not a bad man in any sense of the

word. He was a capable regimental officer, played fair polo, lived up to the very limit of a moderate income, and was generally popular. The trouble lay in his being more popular with women than with men. This Helen did not discover till she had gone back to India with him. A wiser woman would have either shut her eyes to his casual infidelities or left him for good. Helen found the first impossible in Indian stations. The second alternative implied returning to England. That she would not face. Besides, she was very young, with all Jadwiga's fastidiousness, which made her intolerant of sexual promiscuity, and her rigidity of outlook, which would not allow her to suffer blatant unfairness without protest. It was typical of her that she considered Henry unfair rather than immoral, and beastly rather than cruel. Henry, who was in his own fashion extremely fond of his wife, could not understand her attitude in the least. Their life became more and more difficult. With the arrival of two children it became frankly impossibly complicated. At last Henry put his foot down. His comfort was being utterly ruined, and his comfort was the one point on which he was adamant. India was no place for children. They must go home. Either Helen could take them, or, he was sure, her mother would be delighted to have them. He did not care for them, both boys, and inclined to be delicate. The more he thought of it, the more the idea of handing them over to Jadwiga ap-

pealed to him. He became insistent. And Helen, worried almost beyond endurance between the claims of her husband and her boys, solved the dilemma by catching cholera and dying in agony.

Henry Sale was upset, remorseful, and altogether jolted out of his usual complacency. But he was more than ever set on his plan for the future of the children. He despatched them with a long letter in the care of a brother-officer who was going home, saw them start for Bombay, and then volunteered for service on the North-West Frontier. There he was killed seven months later by a chance bullet that was fired into the camp at the Malakand by an optimistic Chitrali sniper. He left behind him about a hundred pounds' worth of small debts, and the generally expressed opinion that he 'had been a good fellow. Pity he was such an ass with women!'

To Jadwiga the gain of the two boys more than consoled her for the death of her daughter and Henry Sale. She paid the latter's debts with a certain grim satisfaction, feeling that therein perhaps lay a symbol of the absolute transference of Eric and Ladislus from their parents to her. She was glad that Helen had outraged convention, and bothered Henry Sale quite a good deal, in insisting that her elder son should have a Polish name. (Henry had been sure that the poor little devil would have to suffer for it at his public school.) Altogether Jadwiga was pleased with Ladislus. Over Eric she shrugged her

shoulders. Even at three he was as blatantly English as his name. Jadwiga consigned his future to Rugby and Oxford without a pang, and with hardly a thought. She fully expected him in the long run to go the way of his father — and she was not to be so very far wrong. But Ladislav was another story. Even as a small boy there was something in his face which reminded her occasionally of Stanislas Konski. She was sure that there was plenty of the Polish strain in his blood. She set herself to strengthen and to quicken that strain. For the first time since Stephen Bruce's death, she found something in life for which she could care: not for Ladislav personally, but for the conversion of Ladislav into a Pole and a Konski.

To achieve that end she spared neither herself nor the boy. While Eric was being healthily bullied at a private school, Jadwiga was grounding his brother in the elements of Polish, German, and French, and building up in Ladislav's imagination a vivid picture of the romantic tradition of Polish history. She would take no risk of Ladislav being moulded by a public school. Though it hurt her to lose sight of him, she sternly repressed her feelings, now as so often before, and sent him abroad to master his languages, to ride and shoot and fence, while Eric revolted from compulsory games into intellectual snobbery, and absorbed dates, facts, Latin syntax, and kitchen-garden French with a success worthy of a

better cause. While Eric navigated the Cher, wrote very minor poetry, experimented gingerly with his first flirtations, and exceeded his allowance, Ladislav went to the Sorbonne, travelled over a good deal of France and Germany, crossed the Mediterranean for a six weeks' trip into the desert, and was disappointed by the isles of Greece. Then he came home to seek further guidance from his grandmother. She smiled at him enigmatically, secretly well pleased. She was more than content to increase Eric's allowance, and to agree to his plea for a fourth year at the university. For it was the summer of 1914 when Ladislav returned from his Mediterranean trip, and Jadwiga intended that at the beginning of August he should go with her to Poland, where she would lay the coping-stone on his education. But Fate had not done with her yet. There were other people whose plans were timed to materialise during those hot August days.

BOOK II

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

A GENTLEMAN-AT-LARGE

N the summer of 1920 there were few places in Europe more pleasant or more picturesque than Warsaw. And at lunch-time the pleasantest place in Warsaw was the Restaurant Astoria, over which old Casimir's great white moustaches hovered as in benediction. The Astoria had not the definite if evanescent fame of the Hotel Bristol, whose very page-boys were reputed to be in the pay of the French Secret Service, and whose lounge contained a selection of ladies so lovely, so inexplicable, that their profession was universally realised to be that of Rahab and the spies combined in one. But the Astoria offered something more precious than rubies and cocottes. It offered the best cooking in Eastern Europe. And at a time when Warsaw was full of British, French, and American officers engaged in the task of feeding a starving country, there was something suitably ironic in the sight of them lunching daily better than, and at a fifth of the price possible, at the Meurice, the Savoy, or the Ritz-Carlton.

Again, the Astoria had joined that select band of places where one must, if one wait sufficiently long,

meet anyone whom one desires to encounter, so making itself one with Piccadilly Circus (Pavilion corner), Port Said, Carfax, and Monte Carlo.

Accordingly it was without much surprise that young Frank Boughton, attached to the British Embassy as some kind of unofficial extra military attaché, saw a familiar face surmounting the crimson and silver-laced collar of the uniform of a captain of Polish Lancers.

‘By God, it’s Laddie — on the loose!’ he cried.

Ladislav Sale looked up from his *zakonski*, smiling amiably, and held out a thin brown hand.

‘Dear Frank!’ he said, in a pleasantly low-pitched voice. ‘I love you very much, and it’s delightful to see you again, but I do not need you to visit the sins of my — er — grandmother, who gave me this name, upon me so loudly in a sufficiently public place, and one dedicated to such good food!’

Boughton sat down, and dispassionately poured himself out a glass of Ladislav Sale’s vodka.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded.

‘*Et tu quoque?*’ said Ladislav.

‘I have relatives,’ murmured Frank Boughton apologetically. ‘They have a bit of a pull with the War Office, and they prefer me to live abroad!’

‘So have I,’ said Ladislav, ‘but only one that counts. If you really want to lunch with me, I’ll explain how I did get here, and why I’m masquerading as an Uhlan!’

He produced a cigarette-case, and turned it over and over in his fingers before choosing and lighting a cigarette.

‘As you know, Frank, the war stopped, just when we’d all got so used to it that we couldn’t be happy until we’d got it again. At least, that was what happened to me. Could I get a job in England? Did my country need me? As far as I could see the only job for me was that of a professional dancing-partner. Well, I finally went and interviewed my old grandmother. I’ve a brother called Eric, one of those curious literary fellows, who’d been doing a bit of fighting too. We went in together. You see the old lady brought us up, for our parents lived and died in India. She it was who gave me this damned silly name. She’s a Pole, and has got one herself — Jadwiga: rather pretty.’

Boughton drank off his third glass of vodka.

‘I wondered where you got your languages from, Laddie,’ he said, ‘when I knew you in France.’

‘All the old lady’s doing. She brought me up abroad, so that I even know Polish and a smattering of Russian. But anyway in we marched, Eric and I, to ask her what we’d better do.

‘By Jove, she’s a study, that old woman. If Eric doesn’t put her into a novel, he’s the most almighty fool — a thin, little, dried-up creature, with eyes like steel buttons; a face all skin and bone, with a fierce thin nose jutting out like a dagger. As a kid

she terrified me. Now I still find her terrifying, but in a different way ——'

Ladislav paused suddenly.

'Go on,' said Boughton. It struck him that Eric was not the only romantic, hypothetically literary one in the Sale family.

'En passant, Casimir recommends the raspberry soufflé,' continued Ladislav. 'But to proceed: the old lady sat in a straight-backed chair, on a hot summer day, in front of a big fire. She never in all her life has been able to cope with the English climate. And I remember that she was wearing a dark green silk dress, and long earrings of old paste and steel that clicked as she moved her head. She looked something between a royal mummy and a white eagle, with that dried brittle-looking skin, and her very bright, swift eyes.'

'My dear Laddie,' Boughton interrupted, 'with such a vivid imagination you ought to be writing communiqués for the Polish Press Bureau.'

Ladislav laughed.

'I suppose it does all sound a little exaggerated, Frank, but I don't mind telling you that even now when I go to see the old lady I get that dentist's-waiting-room and interview-with-the-head-master sort of feeling. She's so amazingly self-sufficient, and so incredibly sensible. She took Eric first.

"I'll help you to pretend to starve in a garret," she said to him. "You're a very English young man,

sentimental to the core. But you may write tolerably one day, after you've made an utter fool of yourself over a woman, or women, and so learned something about your material." She never liked Eric much. That was why she sent him to a public school and to Oxford. He was sentimental, but not Slav. He prefers Schubert to Chopin — you know the type. And Eric smiled at her, just hating it; and twisted his fingers together.'

'Now, Laddie, get to the point!'

'Bien! I will. She looked me up and down, rather like a smart tailor if one comes into his shop with a suit off the peg.

"Why do you think I educated you abroad and had you taught Polish?" she asked me finally.

'I looked foolish, and said that I supposed she had had her reasons.

"Don't be a fool, Ladislas!" she snapped out. "You're not one of these islanders, like Eric. You're like my father. You're a Konski. Go to Poland and seek your fortune!"

'Of course I just stared. But when I'd thought for a little, it didn't seem such a bad scheme after all. I do know the language. I'd learnt a little soldiering. They want officers here for an army made up of the Polish remnants of Austrian, Russian, and German regiments. I hate Bolsheviks, and I couldn't find anything to do in England. I said I'd go.'

'Well?'

‘Well, me voici! The old lady gave me her blessing and a really lovely little miniature of my great-grandfather, old Stanislas Konski. I wish I thought I was half as good-looking.’ And Ladislas pulled a tiny oval out of his uniform breast-pocket.

Boughton looked down at it curiously. It was certainly an exquisite bit of work, but Frank Boughton was a good fellow and a soldier rather than an æsthete. It was the face that interested him — the beaky Polish nose, craggy cheek-bones, and wide-set eyes. He looked from the miniature to Ladislas and back again.

‘You’ve the nose and eyes,’ he said. ‘It’s your mouth and chin that give you away as a product of our decadent generation. By the way, though, did you say his name was Konski?’

‘I did. Konski was my grandmother’s name before she came to England after the ’63 rebellion and married.’

‘Did you leave any relatives over here?’ asked Boughton.

‘I believe she had a brother,’ said Ladislas indifferently, ‘who made his peace with the Russians, married a daughter of one of their generals, did well for himself generally, and was given back the confiscated estate.’

Frank Boughton lit a cigarette and leaned over the table.

‘Look, Laddie,’ he said quietly, ‘at that table in

the corner, where old Casimir is standing at this minute. Do you recognise them?’

Ladislav looked. There were two men at the table. One was of stoutish build, with a smooth, clean-shaven face, and the neat black coat and well-tied satin tie of any business man. His features were typically Russian, but quite unremarkable until you noticed his eyes, which were tawny like a tiger’s and disconcertingly all-seeing. Ladislav recognised him at once as Boris Savinkov: former terrorist, novelist, once Minister of War under Kerensky, and now reputed to be intriguing in Warsaw for a Polish alliance with the White General Wrangel. It was difficult, looking at him in that fashionable restaurant, to realise that he had been implicated up to the hilt in the murder of the Grand Duke Serge, and that he was one of the stormiest petrels of European sub-politics.

‘I see Savinkov, of course,’ said Ladislav.

‘The other man calls himself Michael Ivanovich Konski,’ said Boughton impressively. ‘I imagine he is your cousin — son of the gentleman who rus-sianised.’

Ladislav started, and stared shamelessly. It was hard to see any likeness of feature, for Savinkov’s companion was a man of quite forty, with a black beard and moustache, and a dead-sallow skin. Although he was sitting, he was obviously a very big man, with huge shoulders and a chest that looked as

if it would burst the buttons of his tunic. He was wearing the uniform of a Russian officer, with the wide, gold-embroidered epaulettes, and the Cross of Saint George.

‘Who is he, Frank?’

‘I doubt if anyone knows except perhaps Savinkov,’ replied Boughton with a shrug. ‘He’s supposed to have been an officer in the Imperial Guard. He’s known to be, technically speaking, a White. I believe he is running some sort of local White banditti somewhere on the Lithuanian frontier. The authorities here fight rather shy of him, for he has a queerish reputation.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, no one really knows what’s going on in that sort of no man’s land between Poland and Bolshevik Russia. If there is a place where civilisation has ceased to exist ——— Damn it, Laddie, look at his face! I apologise if he is a relative of yours, but I’ll swear if he is that he’s the exception to your family rule of amiability, to put it mildly!’

Ladislav dropped his cigarette stump into his coffee-cup.

‘D’you know him, Frank?’

‘I know Savinkov. Come and be introduced.’

‘It would be tempting Providence to refuse such an offer,’ said Ladislav, and stood up smiling.

The two Englishmen crossed the room. Boughton spoke to Savinkov in Russian. Bows were exchanged

and heels clicked. But when Savinkov introduced his companion to Ladislav, with a rapid phrase of explanation of identity, Michael Konski sprang to his feet, and thrust across the table a huge and hairy hand.

'I have always hoped some day to meet my English cousin,' he said heartily; and called to a waiter for another bottle of wine. 'Am I too inquisitive if I ask what has brought you to Poland and clothed you in that very becoming uniform?'

Ladislav offered his cigarette-case before he replied. Michael Konski puzzled him: Boughton had hinted of an evil reputation, and the man's face was that of a savage as well as a soldier. Yet he spoke in a high, cultivated voice. And the smile which showed magnificent teeth was almost charming.

'I'm an adventurer, seeking my fortune in a country that might have been mine,' he said at last. 'England could find nothing for me to do. Poland needs soldiers. Me voici!'

Michael Konski leaned across and clinked glasses.

'We are alike in more than blood then,' said he. 'I too might have been a Pole. My adopted country, Russia, is in the hands of madmen and murderers. I am, if not in Polish uniform, a soldier of Poland against the Bolsheviki.'

Savinkov was smiling quietly through a fume of cigarette smoke, as though he watched a play. Frank

Boughton was gravely polishing the bowl of a pipe on the sleeve of his uniform.

‘Where are you quartered?’ asked Konski, after a pause.

‘I’ve a cavalry captain’s commission,’ said Ladislas. ‘But so far I’m not posted to any definite unit. I believe a new lancer regiment is being formed. Things are in such an unholy mess — I’m afraid I may have to hang about in Warsaw for weeks ——’

‘One moment,’ interrupted Savinkov, leaning forward and glancing round the emptying restaurant with those disconcertingly feline eyes. ‘Could we not persuade our friends here, Major Konski, that your cousin is just the man we need?’

Boughton frowned. Ladislas stared.

‘You must forgive me, Captain Sale,’ Savinkov went on. ‘Perhaps I ought to explain. Major Konski has formed a small company of counter-revolutionary Russians, mostly ex-officers of the old army, who carry on a guerilla campaign against the Reds on the frontier in the neighbourhood of Grodno. Now that war is openly declared between Russia and Poland, this body of devoted men is of great value to the Polish High Command. The Konski castle is a ready-made and well-garrisoned fortress at the enemy’s very gates. But at present Major Konski is not officially recognised nor supported by the Polish Government. If they could be persuaded to send you to him as a liaison officer ——?’

‘Would you accept my hospitality, dear cousin?’ asked Konski.

‘I always intended to visit the place if I ever came to Poland,’ admitted Ladislav. ‘Can it be done, Frank?’

‘Probably. You can try,’ said Boughton.

Konski’s great hands suddenly clenched on the tablecloth.

‘It’s not civilisation, cousin,’ he said abruptly, almost fiercely. ‘But I can offer you excitement, and even amusement. Men with nothing left to lose but their lives are good company in such an environment. And I should like my wife to meet you ——’

‘Your wife?’ cried Ladislav. ‘I beg your pardon, but it seems ——’

‘Queer that she should remain with me in such circumstances,’ said Michael Konski. ‘Yes. She is queer. But then she is an Englishwoman and beautiful — which is also queer. She married me during the Revolution!’

That last sentence, with its casual air of indifference, its curious inversion of the subject and object of the ceremony, swept away Ladislav Sale’s instinctively amiable attitude towards his new cousin. There was something unnatural in an English girl being married to this smooth-spoken Muscovite giant, in the fact that she was with him in the castle on the Niemen, among his banditti, and on the very frontier of Bolshevism. Ladislav wondered uncontrol-

lably who she had been. . . . Had she been left in the castle with the desperadoes, while Michael Konski plotted in Warsaw with Boris Savinkov, and drank brandy in the cosmopolitan comfort of the Restaurant Astoria? In short, an entirely unreasonable feeling, combined of unlimited chivalry and stark curiosity, flamed high in Ladislas Sale. He stood up, facing his cousin.

‘If it can be managed, I’ll come,’ he said.

Michael Konski leaned back in his chair and laughed loudly.

‘Magnificent!’ he cried. ‘I shall look forward to your coming.’

Boughton and Ladislas moved away to their own table, and the latter signalled for his bill.

‘Is there anything really fishy about Konski, Frank?’ asked Ladislas.

‘Well,’ said Boughton decisively — but the rest of his answer was blown into oblivion by a sudden blare of trumpets from the street outside.

They moved to the window. The pavements were thronged with a seething crowd of people, who did not cheer, but seemed rather to watch with a tense apprehension of traditional disaster. Ladislas was suddenly acutely conscious of the resurrection of Poland; of a thrice-conquered, triply manacled, savagely maltreated race, almost dazed by liberty suddenly regained, blinking stupidly in its sudden glare. . . .

Down the street moved a column of cavalry, leaving for the front. To Sale and Boughton, who had known war in the West for a highly commercialised and standardised proposition, reduced to terms of science and mathematics, and robbed of every ounce of the glamorous and picturesque, there was a touch of the fantastic, even of musical comedy, in that regiment headed by trumpeters, its colours flying in superb defiance of the death of the romantic tradition in warfare. The men were a mixed lot enough; the uniforms a wild medley: Austrian, German field-grey, Russian khaki, the horizon blue of Haller's Polish legion which had fought in France. Most of them looked the merest boys, and their horses made Boughton, a Tenth Hussar, shudder visibly. But they sat well in their saddles, with schapskas valiantly tilted, and stared grimly straight before them into the east.

Ladislav remembered the Polish regiments of Napoleon's Grand Army topping the rise that laid Moscow clear before them in the sunshine. He wished violently that he was riding with that regiment towards the Russian frontier. He could feel the miniature against his chest, and thought of old Stanislas facing a level row of Russian carbines . . . Russians!

He turned from the window, his eyes unashamedly filled with tears.

Michael Ivanovich Konski in his Russian uniform

was still sitting over his wine, and laughing at some remark of Savinkov's. Ladislav at that instant loathed him.

He turned sharply on his heel, and followed Frank Boughton down the stairs and into the street.

CHAPTER II

RETURN OF A PRODIGAL

IT was then in something of the spirit of joyous adventure that Ladislas Sale left Warsaw three days later. Perhaps it was as well that his inner man was armoured with romantic ideas, for there was little of the picturesque about the more material details of his journey. He was carried by a worn if powerful American motor-car; he wore a stained trench-coat over his Polish uniform; his only companion was his chauffeur — a Pole from America, who had driven for an American Staff in France, and was known to the world in which he had his being as 'Bloody Bill.' The miniature in his breast-pocket seemed a ridiculous make-weight against the departure of prancing war horses, gay silks and armour, gallant comrades-in-arms from an unappreciative world.

Not that Ladislas was actually engaged in making unprofitable comparisons, as the big car rounded the cathedral and headed for the Vistula bridges. He had other things to occupy his mind — principal amongst them being the indefinite, almost exasperating, nature of his mission.

The day after he had met his cousin in the Restaurant Astoria, Ladislas had received a telephone message from Frank Boughton, which had sent him

hastily to a small building not far from the Ministry for War. Therein he had had an interview, sufficiently curious, with Boris Savinkov, and a colonel, who proved to be a sub-chief of the Polish Intelligence Department.

The introductions having been effected, the Colonel gave Ladislav a cigarette, and put him into a comfortable chair. Then he took a pile of documents out of his desk.

'I understand from M. Savinkov,' he said, 'that he spoke to you the other day of his ideas by which through a liaison officer of our army we might make use of Major Michael Konski's band as a kind of outpost and post-office for frontier intelligence.'

'Quite so, sir,' said Ladislav.

'I have been ordered to make arrangements accordingly,' continued the Colonel.

He glanced at Savinkov, and Ladislav wondered how much love was lost between the ex-terrorist and the Polish officer. Little, if any, he rather imagined. . . .

'Captain Boughton brought your special qualifications forward, Captain Sale. Your knowledge of Russian, your relationship to Major Konski ——'

'Both slight, I am afraid, sir.'

'That is not altogether a handicap,' said the Colonel dryly. 'In any event, you will proceed forthwith to the Konski castle. I think that is all, M. Savinkov?' he concluded pointedly.

'I am more than gratified, monsieur le colonel,' said Boris Savinkov. He smiled broadly at Ladislav, bowed to Boughton, and left the room.

'Now to business,' said the Colonel, when the door had closed. 'As you have probably gathered, we have no particular confidence in Major Konski. Even in the Russian Army he had the reputation of a gambler and a rake. His men are little more than brigands. But his position on the frontier is undoubtedly remarkable: if he cares to help us, he can be of the greatest service. At the same time he may easily be playing a double game. He may be in Soviet pay. Your mission is in the first case to collect, sift, and forward information. In the second, to get proofs of treachery, and use them to the best advantage. You will have to work on your own. I can promise you no aid. Our main military effort will be made in the direction of Kieff. The northern front will be lightly held, and possibly considerably withdrawn. I will give you means of getting in touch with agents of ours in that part of the country, and a method of sending your reports. Apart from that, as you say, it is up to you.'

Ladislav rose and saluted.

There followed a quarter of an hour's technical instruction in a simple code; the production of a map and a list of names that had to be memorised. And then Ladislav was lunching with Frank Boughton in anything but a normal state of mind.

To be honest with himself, Ladislas had to admit that he was still puzzled, uneasy, and acutely anxious, now that he was settled in his car and heading for the Lithuanian hinterland. This vague, undefined intelligence work was something new to him, who had been no more in France than a reasonably competent company commander in a line regiment. And there remained lurking in the back of his mind the vaguely traditional idea that spying — which was, after all, what his mission came to — was 'not done by the best people'; and even more than that, 'it was not the thing' to accept the hospitality of a man on whom one proposed to spy. It will be remembered that if Ladislas had been educated abroad, his younger brother Eric had experienced and survived Rugby and Oxford.

On the other side fought acute curiosity roused by the curious meeting in the Astoria with Michael Konski; the obedience to orders instinctive to a soldier, and perhaps, most vigorous of all, the strange hatred of Russia and Russians, which seemed to have been slumbering unconsciously within Ladislas's inmost being, fired by the miniature of old Stanislas, and fanned into a blaze by the sight of Polish troops leaving for the front. English tradition, English habits of mind seemed incredibly far away when he was following in his turn the road to the east.

To English eyes the countryside was strange

enough: no hedges, no tarred roads, no cheerful bicyclists with picnic baskets, nor lumbering hay-carts; no banks topped by overhanging trees, none of the cosy warm friendliness of English fields and farms and streams. The car was travelling fast, but it seemed to make a snail's progress across the vast and quietly undulating plain: its course ahead was visible for miles, with hardly a rise to break the monotony. Only here and there a melancholy cluster of pines, a shallow, sluggish stretch of river, and the occasional white Polish houses. From the point of view of civilisation, as it is understood in the West, it was an alien land, singularly lacking in milk and honey; a land difficult of definition, incapable of comprehension; a land, too, that for all its width of horizon held something of the mysterious, even of the sinister. The face seemed too expressionless to be other than a mask.

It may have been that Ladislav, with his youth, his curiosity, and his romantic notions, was only acutely conscious that his American tyres were bearing him every hour some forty miles nearer to the place where his forefathers had lived, not altogether unworthily, and died not quite ingloriously: the castle of which his grandmother Jadwiga yet dreamed beside her fire in Bayswater. But whatever the cause, he no longer felt a stranger in a strange land. He was coming home. It was a sensation akin to the first sight of the slums of the Surrey side

when a boy comes back to London from school. And, beside it, problems of conduct, especially the problems of the niceties of the etiquette of secret service, lapsed into utter insignificance. The details of war are a matter for opportunism anyway. . . .

Ladislav's mind began to wander hither and thither, to become without form and void. Wasn't it Sherlock Holmes who had said somewhere that it was a capital mistake to theorise without sufficient data? And it was to avoid that subtle temptation that Ladislav leaned back in the car and tried to sleep. It was a vain endeavour. The German occupation had been too short, too exclusively military, to have had any permanent effect upon Polish roads. Ladislav was very tired, rather lonely, and supremely uncomfortable, when he stopped for his first night's rest at the inn of some unpronounceable village, and supped on steaming crayfish and boiled eggs, both of which the landlord seemed to expect him to eat with his fingers. . . .

The next day he had 'Bloody Bill' roused to make an early start. And by midday Ladislav not only felt, but saw, civilisation receding with every mile. In this debateable land, called Polish, Lithuanian, or White Russian, according to the political sympathies of one's informant, the usual result of disputed authority was very clear. The country lay much as it had been left when the Russian revolution and the German collapse had withdrawn the

great armies and silenced the guns. For mile after mile there was nothing but the abomination of desolation: not the concentrated, incredible chaos of the Ypres salient, nor the almost picturesque wreck of Rheims; but a formless, unheroic wasteland, of deserted, slightly battered farms, shallow inadequate trenches, pitiful graves, shell-snapped trees grotesque in their mutilation, villages with bullet-pitted walls and a shattered churchtower. On every side the apparently limitless plain; overhead the incurious sky. Nowhere the trivial barricades raised by humanity against nature: so fantastically flimsy, so unutterably dear. The return to nature was at the moment distinctly more obvious than the picturesque and romantic circumstance of the prodigal's return to the home of his fathers. . . .

The long road crested a slight rise, dipped, and bent aside to round a wedge of trees. The car turned, and Ladislav sat up with a jerk at the sudden application of the brakes. There was no need for the putting of questions to 'Bill.' Perhaps fifty yards ahead a small and dingy two-seater was blocking the road, its front wheels laughably askew. Kneeling beside it crouched a figure in horizon-blue, a revolver in each hand. As Ladislav's eyes took in the picture, there came the sharp crack of three shots: one from the Frenchman, two from his unseen ambushers.

'Get on!' yelled Ladislav, fumbling with his holster.

The car shot forward. Ladislas glared about him; but could find no target. Then, just as they reached him, the French officer dropped one of his pistols, and staggered against the car, blood pouring over one of his sleeves. The Cadillac's wind-screen was smashed by a bullet. But 'Bloody Bill' rose nobly to the occasion. He stopped the car for only half a minute — time to lean over, get a grip of the Frenchman's belt, and swing him back into the tonneau beside Ladislas. Then he drove on again, nipping round the damaged little two-seater and avoiding the ditch by a miracle of driving; and they were away down the road at forty miles an hour before the bandits in the trees could do more than fire half a dozen ill-aimed shots after them.

A simple bandage and a little brandy soon pulled the victim together. Very young, in a very smart new uniform, he seemed equally concerned with the mud on his breeches and the trouble he had caused his rescuers.

'I am carrying despatches to our Mission Militaire in Wilno,' he explained.

His thanks when Ladislas informed him that he could travel towards that city were astonishing in their profuseness of expression.

'You know the country, monsieur?' he asked politely, having formally introduced himself as Hippolyte Marcouire — lieutenant of Chasseurs à pied.

'Not yet,' said Ladislas.

Young Marcouire grinned.

'You should stay in Wilno with me,' he murmured. 'Mon Dieu, quel pays! One cannot leave the main street after dusk — one should not go out in the dark. We had two days ago a big American there, of the Red Cross. He carried a Colt and talked big. Monsieur, they stabbed him in four places within four hundred yards of his hotel, and stripped him of everything he had.'

'Who are "they"?' enquired Ladislas.

'No one — banditti, thieves, what you will! Listen, my friend. In the bank they keep a guard of eleven soldiers and a sous-officer. A week ago they were found in their blood: throats neatly cut, and the bank looted. I went to see the Polish commandant — a German Pole. Bon enfant! I asked him: "Whom do you suspect?" He laughed. "Suspect! I know — it is my police!" Nom de Dieu! Quel pays!'

Marcouire, flushed with delight at the naïveté of his audience, fumbled awkwardly for his cigarette-case. Ladislas gave him his own and a match.

'I am not for the town,' he said at last. 'I go to make the acquaintance of one Major Konski, a distant relative of mine.'

'Michael Konski?' asked Marcouire sharply.

'The same.'

'Not that Michael Konski who is known hereabouts as the White Devil of the Niemen? It cannot

be that man, surely, Captain Sale? I could tell you ——'

But Ladislas was looking across the darkening plain; and Marcouire, following his glance, let the words die in his throat. Ahead was a strange red glow in the sky, and a faint mutter as of a pipe being tapped against a wall in the next room.

'Fire, and shooting ——' muttered Marcouire.

'Make for it — all out,' said Ladislas.

He had chosen to come for adventure. Its promise lay straight before them, painted on the lowering sky.

CHAPTER III

DELIGHT OF BATTLE

HARDLY had he taken his rash decision than Ladislas began to question its wisdom. Not that he was going to reverse it, with Marcouire beside him, quivering all over with sheer excitement like a hound in leash and that ruddy glow deepening on the sky. But even as he looked to his revolver, Ladislas asked himself with a sort of puzzled exasperation what he was up to. ~~His job was intelligence, not fighting.~~ If the business ahead was a skirmish between Polish frontier guards and Soviet troops, he and Marcouire were unlikely to be able to do more than get shot, untidily and by either side in an undignified scrimmage. He had not come to Poland for that. It would be a dismal epilogue to having survived a year in France. And yet in his innermost heart he knew he would not do anything to cross the driving of Fate. Anglo-Saxon decision and sense of the realities were out of place, no longer seriously to be regarded. In fine, what could either Ladislas Sale or his mission matter, drifting as he was upon a sea of circumstance without either landmark or currents?

Beside him Marcouire laughed softly.

'Que diable dans cette galère? eh, mon ami?'

'Exactly,' said Ladislas shortly.

'But you are partly Slav,' said the little lieutenant. 'Well?'

'It should help you to avoid tiresome self-questioning, at least, my dear Sale — at least, with regard to practical matters!'

'If you really want to know what I feel like,' said Ladislav with a grin, 'I feel like a schoolboy about to indulge in ragging a prefect's study.'

'Then you remain English,' laughed Marcouire. 'I was liaison officer at Loos. I saw your men attack behind their football and singing comic songs. Your countrymen need no gesture to help them to die!'

The car increased speed, as though engaged in a forlorn race against the gathering darkness. But nothing showed in the glare of the great headlights but the uneven surface of the road. The firing had ceased. But the glow from the fire brightened, and half an hour brought the adventurers to the top of a long, low ridge from which they could see plainly the flames of burning houses; over them smoke drifted, visible against the early stars, carrying to their nostrils the bitter reek of fire.

At the sight of the hypothetical quarry Hippolyte Marcouire let out a yell of excitement, and swung himself into the front seat of the car beside 'Bloody Bill.' Between the shoulders of his companions Ladislav peered ahead, tight-lipped, acutely curious rather than thrilled.

But there was nothing to be seen, apart from the

two rows of mean houses going up in flame and smoke, till the street bent acutely, and the Cadillac swerved, skidded, and had to be halted almost against a semi-ruined wall. At sight of what was exposed round that corner in the light of the burning houses, Marcouire leaped out of the car and stood still, shaking all over and swearing softly to himself. 'Bloody Bill' looked to Ladislas for orders. But the latter was lying back in his corner, feeling very sick. The middle of the road was blocked by a pile of bodies, flung together higgledy-piggledy in a great pool of blood. Most had their throats cut neatly, with a gash down each side of the neck. A few were slashed and horribly mutilated. And beyond the evidence of systematic butchery of prisoners, lay snapped sword-blades of ancient pattern, a few rifles, and a litter of cartridge-cases. It had been a very perfect destructive raid. A feeble attempt at resistance had given the attackers opportunity to burn and murder wholesale. There were bodies of women and children in the pile, and against the wall where the car had stopped, Marcouire found a cat with its back broken by a savage boot, and ended its misery with his automatic.

There was nothing to be done. It was simply the *reductio ad absurdum* of war and all that it implies: the sudden casual blotting-out of innocent people and things for some obscure purpose for which no possible connection of reason could be traced.

'Soviet cavalry, d'you suppose?' asked Ladislas at last, as they got the Cadillac clear, and jolted away from the heat and crackle of the fire and the ghastly defilement of the village street.

'Looks like it,' agreed the Frenchman, and pointed.

One, at any rate, of the attackers had paid in full. A dead horse sprawled beside the road, and the rider in Cossack uniform lay beyond it, fantastically askew and unreal. He had been shot through the head, and lay face downwards in the mud.

Ladislas told Bill to stop, and crossing the road stooped over the dead man. Marcouire followed, and together they turned the body onto its back. What Ladislas expected to discover he had no idea himself. He had acted merely on impulse: a morbid impulse too, he decided, as he peered down upon the shattered forehead and horribly ape-like features so marred with dirt and blood. The dead man had been that ordinary debased peasant type, so common among Russian soldiers; and in his death there was more of the grotesque than of the tragic. Ladislas shrugged his shoulders.

'Yes,' he said. 'I think it must have been a patrol of Red Cossacks.'

Marcouire did not reply. And Ladislas turning, saw the Frenchman on his knees beside the corpse fumbling with its filthy overcoat.

'What is it?' demanded Ladislas.

Marcouire at last succeeded in rolling the sleeve

of the heavy coat back from the hairy wrist. His quick eye had spotted a glint of metal. And Ladislas, looking over his shoulder, watched his thin fingers trying to unfasten the clasp of a gold chain bracelet from the Cossack's wrist.

'No good,' he said. 'You see, *mon ami*, it is fastened by a tiny padlock — and look here!'

He turned the wrist over. On the back of it, where a man might be expected to wear a wrist-watch, was a flattened ivory disc, carved in the form of a grinning skull, and attached to the bracelet.

'Queer trimming for a Cossack,' said Ladislas. 'Do you suppose it's loot?'

Marcouire rose to his feet, smiling rather queerly.

'I'd heard of it, but I'd never seen one before,' said he. 'The White Skulls — no. The Bolsheviks are foul fighters, but they did not sack this village. Your cousin of the Niemen has a pretty taste in symbols, my dear Sale.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'The white skull is the badge of his *condottiere*,' said Marcouire. 'It is well known in these parts. When he enlists a recruit, he gives him a bracelet, and keeps the key of the padlock. What you would call "a quaint conceit," eh?'

'You mean, it was his men who ——' Ladislas stopped, and looked back at the smoke of the burning village, which veiled even from the dispassionate stars that welter of devilry and murder.

'It is characteristic enough,' murmured the Frenchman. 'But the skull is conclusive.' He pointed to the dead body, and moved back to the car.

Ladislav followed him, ordered Bill to go ahead, and lay back in the tonneau. He had been flung back suddenly into the Middle Ages, and comment seemed superfluous. He was only acutely conscious that twentieth-century civilisation and upbringing, even inclusive of the experience of modern war, were inadequate in certain circumstances. He felt that old Stanislas Konski would have known how to cope with a situation, which his grandson could only envisage as a particularly horrible and unbelievable nightmare.

'You are very silent, my friend,' said Marcouire at last.

'I was trying to think,' replied Ladislav.

'I have learned the futility of that effort,' said Marcouire. 'One gets used to anything. After you have enjoyed your cousin's hospitality for a few weeks, the sack of a few miserable hovels will not strike you as remarkable any longer. You may return to Warsaw with one of his pretty bracelets en souvenir.'

'Look here, Marcouire ——'

The lieutenant put a restraining hand on Ladislav's arm.

'Listen,' said he. 'The first time I saw death, it

was a poor devil of a quartermaster, hit by a stray bullet miles behind the lines in Champagne; I saw him in a ditch with his face smashed in. And I sat down by that ditch and was very sick. A week later I crossed a field with perhaps five hundred dead men sprawled across it. I hardly bothered to step over the bodies.'

'But damn it all! I can't see myself riding with Konski on that sort of errand of mercy!'

'You have yet to meet him, my dear Sale.'

Ladislav relapsed into silence. Marcouire's youthfully cynical gaiety jarred upon him so that he did not dare to reply. Scared, angry, and disgusted, he was afraid he might quarrel with the Frenchman. He felt a crying desire to quarrel with somebody, anybody....

The car ran on through the night. About fifteen miles from the village, it stopped suddenly and unexpectedly, with a guttural exclamation from 'Bloody Bill.'

'What is it?' grumbled Ladislav.

Then he sat up with a jerk. Bill had switched off the headlights.

For a moment they sat, tense and expectant, in the darkness. Then Marcouire drew in his breath sharply.

'Can you turn here?' he said.

Bill shook his head; and Ladislav staring in front of him heard distinctly the clatter and jingle of cavalry moving at a fast trot.

They had almost run into the rear of Michael Konski's desperadoes. And before they could make any decision, four horsemen loomed up through the darkness and surrounded the car. They looked gigantic in the faint starlight. Three steady rifle barrels covered the travellers, and a soft, rather high voice invited them to alight with considerable alacrity.

There was no mistaking that voice. It was Michael Konski himself. He had reined up in front of the car, and as Ladislav got out into the muddy road, he leaned across and switched on the headlights again.

'So we meet earlier than I had expected, cousin,' said Ladislav.

The sudden glare of the lights had set Konski's charger plunging furiously. And even at that moment Ladislav had to admit to himself what a magnificent figure he cut. He handled the horse — a great raking blue-roan stallion — as easily as though it had been a polo-pony. The cartouches on his breast, the hilts of his short straight dagger and curved yataghan, were of gleaming silver. And the front of his high fur cap bore the flat white ivory skull. With his bronzed face, his black beard, his tight-waisted Cossack coat with its wide skirts fluttering, Michael Konski made a magnificent picture. If he were no more than a bloodthirsty bandit, Ladislav admitted that he could dress the part — and wear the dress.

Konski cried a sharp order to his men, who promptly slung their rifles and fell back. Then he dismounted.

'An unexpected pleasure,' he said, holding out his hand to Ladislav. Ladislav bit his lips, and made no move to take it. There was an awkward pause.

'We have just passed through a village in flames,' murmured Marcouire almost apologetically.

Michael Konski smiled.

'And you think I burned it, eh, cousin?'

'We found one of your men dead just beyond it,' said Ladislav.

'Your white skulls are so peculiarly original,' added Marcouire dryly.

The Russian's smile broadened into a hearty laugh.

'Come, cousin!' said he, 'do not treat me quite so much *en famille* so quickly! And I do not think I know this gentleman. *Monsieur le lieutenant Hippolyte Marcouire?* *Enchanté, monsieur, de vous faire la connaissance — merci.* I fear you have heard stories to my prejudice, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Well?'

'But it is so simple. As you may imagine, cousin, my men are not so easy to keep in hand as one would wish. To-night they started without me. That village was to be reconnoitred. I had learned that Bolshevik spies had a meeting-place there. It seems that the inhabitants fired on my men. They got out of hand, and, I admit, behaved badly. I arrived too

late to do more than call them off. But my lieutenant, who had failed to keep discipline, I shot with my own hand. I think you found his body. *Je le regrette beaucoup, mais — que faire?*' He shrugged and again held out his hand.

'We must be friends if we are to be allies, cousin,' he added.

Ladislás allowed his hand to be shaken. After all, the explanation was plausible enough — rather too plausible. Konski's men seemed docile enough now. And there had been a dead horse beside the dead Cossack. . . . He heard Marcouire explaining that he was en route to Wilno.

'But you are not two miles from the Konski castle,' said the Russian. 'You cannot go on to Wilno to-night. You must allow me to offer you hospitality. I insist.'

'You are too good, monsieur.'

There was distinct irony in the Frenchman's level tones, and Michael Konski's left hand played with the hilt of his dagger.

'This country is dangerous at night without an escort,' he said, smiling.

He gave more orders. The horsemen encircled the car. Michael Konski swung himself easily into his saddle, and Ladislás and Marcouire got back into the car.

'Should I try and make a bolt for it?' whispered 'Bloody Bill.'

'Don't be a damned fool!' snapped Ladislav irritably.

Michael Konski rode up beside them.

'Shall we start?' he enquired pleasantly.

'Bloody Bill' looked round at him, a savage expression on his flat, heavy face. A heavy revolver was dangling negligently in Michael Konski's fingers. The car started.

'My wife will be glad to make your acquaintance. She has had no company for weeks,' said the Russian.

Ladislav made no reply. As his cousin's face dropped back into the surrounding darkness, and the car jolted off on the last lap of its journey towards the home of his ancestors, Ladislav thought with ludicrous inconsequence of a night in London fourteen years earlier.

It had been the night of his seventh birthday. For the first time he was sleeping in a bedroom alone. Before he had shared a big room with his brother Eric. But now at last he had his little room all to himself at the top of the house. He had been taken to the theatre for a birthday treat, and something with a flavour of Oriental mystery had stamped itself too vividly upon his imagination. For two hours he had lain awake in the darkness, which his imagination peopled with invisible and pitiless shapes of fear: silent, sweating, small fists clenched. And then, with a creak of some cupboard door, or howl of some amorous cat, his nerve had gone. He remembered

how cold the oilcloth on that top landing had struck to his feet as he pattered downstairs in his pyjamas to the calm refuge of his grandmother, who had been a Konski. Even at that age he had possessed an absolute, unwavering confidence in that old woman's power to reassure. And if she was herself frightening, she frightened comprehensibly. The amazing relief of his safe arrival in that hot green-carpeted drawing-room! Of his sight of the immutable thin figure who sat always so very erect in a straight-backed chair!

Ladislás looked at young Marcouire out of the corner of his eye. That volatile young cynic was peacefully asleep with his mouth open. He might have just come in tired after a game of football. And Ladislás, with the thought of that night of childish terror, wished mightily that he had his grandmother beside him in the place of the lieutenant of chasseurs. . . . He laughed to himself as his imagination replaced the horizon blue and red-topped képi by green silk and paste earrings. . . . But the laugh died as quickly as it had been born, under the weight of Ladislás's conviction that in this journey was the prelude to some desperate and bloody business.

But what had his grandmother said that night in reply to his stammered tale of darkness and terror?

'Ladislás, don't let your imagination run away with you! Go back to bed!'

He could hear the clipped firm sentences echoing in his ears, as though his grandmother sat beside him in reality. The order was unmistakeable. And Ladislav did not share modern democracy's dislike of obedience to orders capably delivered. He sat up in the corner of the car and groped in his breast-pocket for his second cigarette-case. The first he knew was empty. His fingers touched the miniature of old Stanislas Konski. And he felt that the order had been confirmed, this time by a higher authority against which there lay no appeal.

CHAPTER IV

HOME SWEET HOME

THE old lady, who sat beside her fire in Bayswater contemplating the fourth page of Eric Sale's first book — and it was a slim volume of poetry — with a mixture of grim amusement and distaste, might have been gratified, could she have known how very present she had come in spirit to the old castle where she had been born. The faintest realisation of Ladislas's whereabouts and circumstances might, perhaps, have softened the straight line of her lips, or even moistened the bright eyes which still moved so quickly, like those of a bird.

For she had never wearied of telling one story to her favourite grandson: the story of Poland's last stand; of her father's death; and of the days when as a young girl she had been mistress of the Konski castle. Even in the darkness, from a car, and with his villainous escort all round him, that grandson was recognising scene and sequence. And with the recognition, Ladislas fell more and more into the belief that he was but the indifferent executive of higher authority, symbolised, as it were, by his grandmother.

He was roused from his dreaming and his memories by the shout of a challenge and the stopping of the car. They had come into a belt of woodland, and

on both sides of the road great pines loomed against the stars. Just ahead he could see that the road forked, and at the fork stood something resembling a block-house, and in front of it lay a low parapet spiked with bayonets. The horsemen moved away from the car, drew swiftly into a close column, and jingled off along the main road to the right. Michael Konski appeared again in the glare of the headlights leaning from his saddle, talking earnestly to a squat little man on foot, who carried a sword almost as long as himself, and was wearing a very shabby uniform, which had once been that of an infantry officer of the Tsar. Konski dismounted, threw the reins to his subaltern, and came up to the car.

‘Can you find room for me?’ he asked politely.

He climbed in and sat back comfortably between Ladislav and Marcouire.

‘Your chauffeur might proceed slowly along the track to the left,’ he added. ‘I might explain, perhaps, that this is the main guard of our outpost system. Different from Warsaw, eh, cousin? Here we must always be on the *qui vive*.’

They went on, bumping painfully over what was definitely an unacceptable apology for a road; left the trees behind; traversed perhaps half a mile of plain; ran into belts of trees again; and were met by a second challenge. Konski cried a password. This time it was only a solitary sentinel, who came smartly to the salute.

‘To the right here,’ said Konski.

The car swung into an avenue that seemed almost civilised after the track, and ran straight and broad between carefully spaced pines for two or three hundred yards. At the far end of it a great gate of wrought iron stood between stone walls some fifteen feet high. Here too came a challenge. Again Konski replied. The gate opened slowly, and as the car passed it, Ladislav saw the home of his fathers for the first time, as his grandmother had seen it for the last time; an immense unlighted building, that seemed part of the enveloping darkness, implacable, fascinating, desolate under the night sky. Far away, to the north, summer lightning flickered.

As they entered the courtyard the spell of silence and dark mystery was broken as if by the magic of the fairy story. The long windows of the hall were thrown up in oblongs of brilliant gold. The great iron-bound door opened, pouring a flood of light down the worn steps, which were lined by a dozen menservants in blouses of white silk holding torches. A fair young man, with a fierce moustache and an eyeglass, obviously from the Baltic Provinces, gorgeously arrayed in the full-dress uniform of the Russian navy, opened the door of the car and came to the salute.

‘I am glad to be able to show you our home at last, cousin,’ said Michael Konski. ‘All well, Sturm?’

‘All well, Michael Ivanovich.’

‘Good. Let us have something to eat as quickly as possible. And rooms for three guests.’

The aide-de-camp clicked his heels and departed on his errands. Konski led the way up the steps into the hall of the castle.

It was precisely as Ladislav had expected; but as he had feared he might never see it; the same as it had been sixty years before. Candle-light still showed the old portraits on the walls. Skins still covered the stone floor. And above the mighty fireplace still hung the seven-foot two-handed sword, which was said to have hung at the saddle-bow of Chrysostom Konski in that battle of Tannenberg where the chivalry of Poland destroyed the Teutonic knights.

Ladislav was blessed with a good memory, and Jadwiga had forgotten nothing in her telling. There was the long refectory table from Cracow; the huge chair with curved arms in which Stanislas had bade his daughter farewell; the tapestry with the boar-hunt, so typically French, only in place because it had been a gift to Ignatius Konski from that Poniatowski who was a Marshal of France; the antlers above the door which led to the body of the castle, as though in cynical comment upon the habits marital of all the Konskis. And on the empty hearth lay three magnificent Borzois, which might have been the very hounds which had walked at Jadwiga’s heels whenever she had gone abroad alone.

Certainly there are times when familiarity breeds anything but contempt, thought Ladislav, and found Michael Konski at his elbow with a glass of wine. He accepted it gratefully enough. Marcouire was already in the great chair, his legs stretched comfortably towards the hounds. 'Bloody Bill' shifted his feet uncomfortably in a corner. Konski indicated bottle and glasses with a great gesture.

'Help yourselves, and excuse me a minute,' he said. 'I must see that your rooms are ready, and find out if my wife is already in bed.'

And with a laugh and a ring of his spurred heels he strode out under the antlers, leaving his guests to themselves.

'Sit down and have a drink, Bill,' said Ladislav.

The chauffeur obeyed, emptied a glass twice in two gulps, and took a chair in a far corner.

'I like your ancestors better than your cousin,' observed Marcouire quietly, staring at the line of portraits.

Ladislav grinned. Then he picked the iron candlestick from the table and walked along the wall, holding the flame up to the painted history of his line. In lace and steel, in powder and velvet, in plumed hat and schapska his forbears looked down on him as though in mute questioning of his right to succeed them, his blood mingled as it was with that of mongrel Britain. But there was stamped upon his face that which might reassure their uneasy shades —

the beaky nose and sensitive nostrils, the narrow head with its proud carriage, and the wide-set rather hard eyes which were repeated in portrait after portrait along the wall. For the Konskis had been hard, arrogant, fighting Polish nobles, from Chrysostom who had been enfeigned after Tannenberg to Stanislas who had been shot and dispossessed in '63.

He was still standing, with candle held aloft, when Michael Konski returned. He had discarded his sword belt, but still wore his dagger, and a nagaika swung from his wrist. There was an angry look in his eyes.

'Your rooms are ready for you,' he said. 'Sturm will show you. I must just visit my pickets before I turn in. I regret that my wife has already retired. But you will meet her to-morrow. Good-night, and pleasant dreams!'

He cracked the long whip savagely, and the three hounds leaped up and dropped to heel.

'We will have much to discuss in the morning, cousin,' he added, before Ladislas could speak. 'Sturm!'

The naval officer appeared in the doorway. He looked pale and scared.

'Show these gentlemen their rooms!' And Michael Konski swung out into the night, his dogs behind him.

Silent and puzzled, Ladislas followed Lieutenant

Sturm. 'Bloody Bill' was left in a tiny room next the hall. Ladislav and Marcouire were conducted up a wide staircase and along endless corridors to the east wing of the castle, where they were left in adjoining rooms with a punctilious salute.

They were both astonished and gratified to find that Michael Konski had confined his conservatism in furnishing to the great hall. At the same time there was something queer, even sinister, in pile carpets, brocade curtains, silk-covered eiderdowns, and all the luxury of any wealthy English country-house, in rooms from whose windows they could see the broad stream of the Niemen, pallid and without apparent substance, flowing so slowly and so noiselessly from the dark mystery of Russia to the bright mystery of the open sea.

Ladislav opened a window wide and leaned out. For a moment he could hear Hippolyte Marcouire humming some sprightly Parisian air as he folded his clothes. Then a red glow sprang up in the darkness. It seemed to come from beyond the curve of river to the right. With it, clear across the water, came the sound of men singing — some wild song of the steppes, interspersed with shouts and cheers, and the crack of pistol shots — or was it a whip? The glow brightened and sank, the song rose and fell again. Ladislav drew in his head, and sat on his window-sill, smoking a cigarette, waiting for and puzzling over he knew not what.

Then, when once more the night was dark and the silence absolute, he heard faint but clear, like a thread of silver across a bar of lead, the sweet note of a violin, playing the 'Ave Maria' of Schubert.

CHAPTER V

BARBARA RIDES

LADISLAS woke up next morning, having slept admirably, to find one of the silk-bloused manservants drawing the curtains, and letting in a vision of sunshine and blue sky across the Niemen that was no longer ghostly and unreal, but bright and sparkling as a *rivière* of diamonds. China tea in an exquisite Sèvres cup was beside him on a silver tray. He raised himself on one elbow and drank slowly. With sunlight flooding a comfortable bedroom, with the taste of good tea on his palate, and a servant setting out his clothes and asking for instructions as to the desired heat of his bath, the previous night lost all reality. He must have been affected by the long journey by car, the sacked village, and the exotic flavour of his meeting with his cousin . . . things were so different by daylight. . . .

He bathed and dressed quickly, fired by curiosity to explore the Konski demesne. Glancing into Marcouire's room, he saw the French lieutenant still asleep, and as usual smiling. Ladislas envied him his gay hedonism which took everything as it came, careless of self-questioning. He found the hall empty save for the three Borzois, curled up on the hearthstone. But as servants began to come in and

lay the long table, Ladislav wandered out into the courtyard:

Already it was unpleasantly hot. Summer in Poland seems to be compounded of a persistent dry heat, which at first is overwhelming to those who only know the occasional heat-waves of England, and frequent thunder-storms. Everything was very still. The pines beyond the wall of the courtyard rose like darkly barbaric spears against the blue of the sky, motionless and grim. The daylight revealed the plan of the castle. In the darkness it had merely given an impression of size and sombre dignity. But now Ladislav could see that it was built in the form of an open redoubt reversed. Tucked, as it were, into the nook formed by a curve of the Niemen, its two wings ran parallel with the bank, and were joined by the oblong of the main building, most of which was taken up by the great hall. The courtyard lay between the wings. A spiral of wood smoke rose into the still air. Otherwise the place might have been deserted. Ladislav crossed the courtyard. Once it had been closed by a gate, but now there was only a gap in the wall, and the mark of rusty hinges.

Not that Michael Konski slept with his castle door unguarded. As Ladislav reached the wall and made to pass the gap, he heard the click of a rifle-bolt, and found himself facing the levelled bayonet of a sentry who had evidently been squatting on the far side of the wall.

'I am a guest of Michael Ivanovich,' said Ladislás in Russian. 'I only desire to walk a little in the woods.'

The sentry's flattish sallow features did not show any sign either of comprehension or interest. Nor did the rifle move.

'Get out of the way,' said Ladislás.

He felt foolish and inadequate; for, though of course in uniform, he had not the semblance of a weapon with him, not even a cane.

'You cannot pass,' said the sentry.

'Don't be a damned fool!' exploded Ladislás.

The sentry jerked his rifle significantly, bringing the point of the bayonet within a foot of Ladislás's chest.

For an instant Ladislás debated the question of risking a tussle. He felt profoundly irritated. At the same time it would be a stupid finish to get shot on such a lovely day in a scrimmage with a grimy Russian private. The situation, he felt, lacked dignity.

He was therefore relieved to have the impasse liquidated by the sudden drumming of hoofs. The sentry turned to face the newcomer, and in a flash Ladislás was past him. With a guttural exclamation the Russian jumped for him with the bayonet. Ladislás laughed, dodged easily, and, happy in the realisation that the rifle must be unloaded, turned to continue on his walk. But in turning he slipped and

fell heavily. His head struck the ground, and for a moment the sky spun fantastically, till it was blotted out by the menacing figure of the sentry, and the bayoneted rifle lunging down towards him.

Automatically he flung up a useless hand to guard. Simultaneously the rifle clattered within a foot of his head. He raised himself on one elbow, blinking stupidly, to see the sentry standing back ruefully rubbing his left arm. In the foreground stamped a foam-spattered chestnut mare, and astride her back was a girl, in breeches and boots, a riding-crop in one hand.

'Are you hurt?' she asked in English.

She seemed supremely unastonished.

Ladislav scrambled to his feet.

'Not a bit, thanks to you,' he said, smiling.

'You are my husband's cousin, of course?' she said.

Ladislav bowed.

'I am glad to see you.'

She took a cigarette from a little birchwood case and lighted it. 'Curiouser and curiouser!' thought Ladislav.

He had imagined Madame Konski in most incarnations appropriate to distressed maidens in lonely towers. But this self-possessed and admirably breeched young person, with a deadly calm voice, hardly filled the bill. She was beautiful certainly, with her length of thigh and slimness of legs and body. Dull gold hair coiled over the ears gleamed

under a brown 'smasher' hat. The forehead was smooth and very white; the eyes, wide-set and brown, gave an odd impression of seeing very little; nose and mouth were of a classical severity.

'Artemis, but bored with hunting,' thought Ladislas.

The stern young features, with the dull eyes and unnaturally white face, were hardly suited by conventional riding-costume for modern young women. It was easier to imagine her in a short tunic, with one thigh bared and spear in hand, scouring the Bœotian woods or the uplands of Thessaly.

'Do I pass, Captain Sale?'

Ladislas started.

'I beg your pardon,' he said hastily. 'I was staring abominably. You see, you were hardly ——'

'What you expected. I wonder what you did expect.'

Ladislas shrugged.

She dismounted, and told the sentry to take her horse round to the stables. He obeyed.

'I think I had better look after you if you want a walk before breakfast,' she said, with the suspicion of a smile. Then her voice changed, and went hard and toneless. 'This place is a fortress. And Michael's discipline is good. By the way, my name is Barbara. You may claim a cousin's privilege to use it if you like.'

'Thank you,' said Ladislas.

He was astonished, and as they walked along the avenue he glanced stealthily at his companion.

The admirable but hard profile, the casual intimation of her Christian name, the obviousness of the fact that she chose or was forced to wear armour against the curiosity of a stranger regarding her real self, combined to discourage conversation. Yet Ladislav would have sworn that in that first moment when he had seen her slim figure horsed against the sky, handling reins and whip with equal efficiency, he had seen a very different lady; one who could flush with riding, laugh with excitement, and thrill with sheer joy of young life and morning sunshine and blue sky. More and more he wondered at her impassive mask. For, if Michael Konski was a ruffian, he at least was a ruffian unmasked, unashamed. And if she wore it for his benefit, surely she must be glad of the opportunity to drop it in the company of a stranger.

Ladislav let his questioning slide for the moment, and gave his attention instead to his immediate surroundings. His hostess led him along the avenue as far as the outer wall and the wrought iron gate. The sentry there saluted. Immediately beyond the gate a path led diagonally away to the left.

‘We can walk round this way,’ said Barbara.

Ladislav was quite ready to follow her lead, and for perhaps ten minutes they walked on in silence between the trees. The path ended in a clearing, so

symmetrically circular that it was obviously constructed artificially.

As they entered it, the girl stopped abruptly. Ladislás heard her gasp, and felt her hand clutching at his sleeve. He stared at the clearing. But there was nothing to see but the still smouldering embers of a wood-fire, in a heap of gray ashes. Then he looked at Barbara. She looked even whiter than before, but her face was quite impassive. And her hands were both by her sides.

As if to prevent being questioned, she moved forward quietly to a single tree that stood isolated in the middle of the clearing, a few yards behind the dead fire. Ladislás followed. She went right up to the tree; stopped in front of it. Then her riding-whip cracked against her boot, and she wheeled to face Ladislás.

'I think,' she said quietly, 'I am going to be sick. Can you find your way back for yourself? The sentries know you now.' And she was past him and walking swiftly away before he could even grunt in his amazement.

With a final exasperated glance after her vanishing figure, moving so beautifully for all its unromantic clothing, Ladislás in his turn looked at the solitary tree. What the devil was the trouble? It was a veteran tree, of enormous girth and height, and with all its lower branches within some ten feet of the ground carefully cut away. And the bark was curi-

ously scored, almost as if it had been casually slashed with a long knife. It was stained too, as Ladislav remembered tree-trunks he had treated with 'sugar' — that deadly compound of black treacle and Jamaica rum — for trapping moths. But somehow, Ladislav did not see Michael Konski spending his nights collecting moths. . . .

He moved back to the heap of ashes. Beside it lay two or three lengths of rope, with the ends charred and blackened.

'My God!' muttered Ladislav, stepping back, and fumbling for his cigarette-case with a shaky hand. How did Michael Konski spend his nights? How had he spent last night? Had he spent it in the red glow of a fire by a great tree, nagaika in hand, the clearing circled by his men singing? Why had he carried that whip? What spectacle had been lighted by the blaze of the fire? Was it climax or anti-climax that Barbara felt sick and could not face him for another minute?

Over the pines rose darkly the roof of the castle. The answers to his questions lay there. And for once astoundingly without consideration of pro or con, of why and wherefore, Ladislav started back to find those answers.

CHAPTER VI

SPOTS OF THE LEOPARD

EARLY that same morning, while Ladislav was making the acquaintance of his cousin's wife, and striding towards his cousin's castle with an almost comically fierce determination, the Polish Ministry for War was disturbed by events of considerably greater moment. Once more man's desire, here symbolised by the French Military Mission, had outrun performance in the shape of the advance of the main Polish army against Kieff. That army was in retreat along a line of communications hideously extended, its very coherence menaced by Budenny's Red cavalry.

Nor was that all. Frank Boughton found the Astoria a less pleasant place in which to lunch than usual. Even Casimir looked less benignant, and showed no disposition towards amiable discussion of food or politics. And Frank found himself the target of almost blatantly hostile glances from various corners of the room. He commented on it casually enough when Boris Savinkov came up and asked if he might share his table.

Savinkov opened his eyes very wide and laughed.

'And you are surprised, my dear Boughton? You English never lose your infinite capacity for amazing

me. I would almost sooner be a Russian than an Englishman in Warsaw to-day.'

'But why?' asked Frank, very childlike, innocent, and bland.

'Why! Nom de Dieu! Look at the situation! The thrust for Kieff has failed. Why? Because you English sent ten million pounds' worth of munitions to Denikin. His staff sold most of it to the Bolsheviks, who have saved Kieff with English-made artillery and tanks. At the same time your Labour Party will not allow munitions consigned to Poland to be shipped.'

Boughton shrugged.

'It's absurd to scowl at me because the Dockers' Trade Union gets out of hand,' he said.

Savinkov's lips curled unpleasantly.

'It was the same in '63,' he went on. 'England and France sympathised with oppressed Poland to the extent of persuading the Poles into revolt against Russia. Then they left Poland to stew in her own — blood. It is happening again to-day. All history is repetition.'

Boughton rose. Comparative history bored him.

'By the way,' he said, 'have you heard anything of Ladislav Sale?'

'Nothing,' said Savinkov.

'I wonder,' thought Frank, as he made his way down into the street, 'if I could get a few days' leave.'

Warsaw was going to be tiresome if one's Polish friends were all going to look glum and unamiable; if one's uniform was to make one an object of active dislike to the crowds that hung about the Ministry for War waiting for news. Besides they spoke of banning all music in the cafés. . . .

There may have been some vague and indefinable telepathic explanation of the thing that struck Ladislas Sale so forcibly that on reëntering the castle he made a good if meditative breakfast, as opposed to seeking explanations from his cousin. ~~But whether it was something atmospheric, some psychological warning of disaster to Polish arms and the possible ruin of a nation, or mere blind chance,~~ Ladislas, as he crossed the courtyard, remembered something. He remembered that he was an officer in the Polish army, and that he was under orders. By no conceivable stretching of those orders could he get them to embrace a quarrel with Michael Konski over personal idiosyncrasies. The Polish General Staff had sent him as a filter and a conduit-pipe for intelligence gathered by Michael which might be useful to them. If that intelligence was good, they not only could, but they must, wink at the occasional sacking of a village of hovels, the habitual murder by flogging of prisoners, and the unsavoury methods adopted by Michael to keep an iron discipline among his men. Intelligence, not humanitarianism, is the job in

hand, thought Ladislav, and in war it is the job that matters. 'Do your job — and damn your feelings!' as he had heard his colonel say one evening in France, when the ever-burning question of how to cope with a dangerously large number of prisoners had cropped up again.

Ladislav looked up at the portraits on the wall. No Konski had ever damned his feelings, surely. On that point Michael was a true descendant of his line, and he, Ladislav, was the degenerate weakling....

One of the servants came in, bent over Ladislav, and swiftly and silently removed himself again. Under the rim of his plate was a folded piece of paper. Ladislav opened it with a frown. There were three pencilled lines in English:

That we should have early information of any Bolshevik movements in force from Wilno, Minsk, or Dwinsk, is of vital importance.

It was unsigned. But there was no doubt of its authenticity. There was equally no doubt that this was not the moment to quarrel with Michael. . . .

As though he had been waiting on a cue, Michael Konski entered the hall at that moment. He was wearing a Japanese kimono over black silk pyjamas and red Turkish slippers, rather as if a bull had been decorated with ham-frills and rosettes. But in spite of his fantastic costume he was instinct with life and energy.

'I hope you slept well, cousin,' he said heartily, sitting opposite Ladislas.

He clapped his hands, and a servant brought him tea in a glass, and a single slice of dry toast. Ladislas repressed his surprise. Somehow he had expected Michael to start the day with underdone meat and a bottle of vodka.

'I study my figure, you see,' laughed Michael.

Ladislas could not bring himself to join in badi-nage over tea and toast. Without a word he pushed the pencilled slip over to his cousin. Michael's jaw snapped, and his whole body stiffened like a pointer.

'I see,' he said. 'That means those damned fools have made a mess of the attack in the South. They're afraid of a counter-offensive on this flank. Come up to my room. I've my maps there.' He finished his tea and rose.

Michael Konski's own room lay in the west wing of the castle. Like Ladislas's bedroom in the east wing, its windows too looked out over the Niemen. But where Ladislas could see only marsh and endless plain, Michael's view included the tiny hamlet with the ruined church which lay about the junction of the two roads to the north — to Grodno and Kowno.

It was a strange room, thought Ladislas, as he entered it at his cousin's heels, strange and disquieting. Except for the huge maps — one of the environs of the castle, the other of Poland, the Baltic States, and Western Russia — he would have taken it for

Barbara's boudoir. Not that such a dismally Victorian word would have suited the special apartment of his cousin's wife. It was a curious mixture of the luxurious and the finicky. The silk curtains, the cushions, the thick soft carpet were all of mauve; the wall-paper was dull gold with a rough surface. A small sofa and two comfortable armchairs were upholstered in the same mauve. But there were also several Empire chairs and little gilt tables with a mass of knick-knacks: ivory elephants, boxes of alabaster and jade, malachite candlesticks with gold candles, Eastern daggers, silver snuff-boxes. The maps covered two of the walls. The others were bare. There was not a picture or a photograph in the room. And between the two long windows hung an exquisite old crucifix of Spanish silver. Over the mantelpiece was an old-fashioned sword in a rusty scabbard. There was a faint smell of incense.

In spite of his effeminate dressing-gown and slippers, Michael, his great head outthrust to peer at one of his maps, looked like the bull in the china shop. In this soft, scented room Ladislav for the first time felt physically afraid of him.

Michael turned from the wall and struck an Indian gong which stood on one of the little tables.

'Sit down, Ladislav.'

Ladislav obeyed. There came a tap at the door, and the monocled lieutenant put in his head.

'Medvedenko, Grigorieff, and the first squadron

— parade in an hour — marching order,’ snapped Michael. ‘I shall ride Mephistopheles. See to it!’

The door closed. Michael threw himself on the sofa, twisted Ladislás’s note into a hard ball, and flipped it over to him with a laugh.

‘You put your cards down, cousin,’ he said. ‘You realise that you have as good as told me that one of my servants is in Polish pay?’

Ladislás moved uneasily.

‘You said we were to be allies,’ he said.

‘Officially — yes. Not that I am surprised that Warsaw wishes to keep an eye on me. I am curious as to *your* precise instructions, my dear Ladislás.’

Ladislás reddened.

‘Don’t be embarrassed. I will ask no questions. Besides, I will repay confidence with confidence. I know that I have a bad reputation. I know that I and my men are beyond the pale. We live by our wits and the strong hand on the edge of civilisation. You must remember that, Ladislás. If I were squeamish, if I let discipline relax, my life would not be worth an hour’s purchase, and a Soviet patrol could burn this castle to-morrow. The Tsar, the Russian army, Russia, were destroyed by one thing — the weakening of discipline. And my men are what you would call “hard bargains” in England.’

‘Well?’

Michael smiled grimly.

‘Is that burnt village still rankling? Half of my

second squadron — those men of last night — are Caucasian Cossacks of the old Division Sauvage. I was not there to keep them in hand. That was the result. Without me they are savages.'

Ladislav stood up.

'I understand that,' he said. 'But last night from my window ——'

Michael frowned.

'You heard them celebrating their successful return from a raid,' he said. 'It's true that one or two of the prisoners proved obdurate ——' He shrugged.

'And you — flogged them?'

'I had them flogged,' corrected Michael coldly. 'It was necessary. They had to speak, to tell what they knew. It was unpleasant for them, but very necessary for me.'

Ladislav moistened his lips with his tongue. But he was at loss what to say. Michael sprang up and struck one of the tables with his fist, sending oddments flying all over the carpet.

'Nom de Dieu, you *shall* see!' he cried. 'I am of a certain age, my ingenuous cousin. I am not a boy to play with skulls and blood and terror for the fun of the thing! I am a soldier in a hostile country! I must terrorise if I am to live. Without my sobriquet of "The White Devil," my white skulls, my floggings, I could do nothing. This country is dark, savage, barbarous, superstitious, one of the circles of

hell! It takes a devil to have his being in fire and brimstone! Now do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ said Ladislas.

‘But you cannot approve, eh?’ returned Michael sarcastically. ‘Are we enemies then?’

‘I am attached to you en liaison by the orders of my superiors,’ said Ladislas steadily.

Michael stared for an instant. Then he laughed.

‘At least we now understand each other,’ said he.

‘Look here — *Captain Sale!*’

He turned back to the map on the wall.

‘You see the position of the castle,’ he went on, ‘and the three roads running north and east, to Grodno, to Kowno, to Wilno. If your staff want intelligence of a Bolshevik advance in the north, it is from those towns that the movement will come. I take out my first squadron to-day. Within three days I will bring you what you need. Meanwhile the castle is at your disposal. I will instruct Sturm to that effect. I will leave him in command here.’

‘I prefer to come with you,’ said Ladislas.

‘I prefer you to stay,’ said Michael. ‘And here I command. If you insist or make trouble, you and Poland may go to the devil together! There are other ways of saving Konski, Captain Sale.’

‘Very well.’

‘You are wise. I should recommend you to arrange a method by which to forward my report when I bring it in. Apart from that I hope my wife

will entertain you well. Though perhaps I should not speak of it, she has good looks, charm, and an unusual talent for the violin.'

Ladislav started. Michael opened an inner door leading to his bedroom.

'Just one thing more,' he added, his fingers on the door-handle. 'Don't fall in love with my wife, Captain Sale. I was under the regrettable necessity of shooting one of my best officers for that indiscretion. Besides, she is virtuous.'

And with that parting shot Michael passed through the door.

Ladislav took a step towards it, boiling with anger.

'Lieutenant Marcouire would like to see you for a moment, Captain Sale,' came Sturm's soft voice at his elbow, 'if you are disengaged.'

'Oh, blast!' said Ladislav whole-heartedly. And he followed the amazed lieutenant from the room.

CHAPTER VII

EXCHANGE OF COMPLIMENTS

THE evening of the same day found Ladislas once more in his cousin's study — but this time alone. He had spent most of the day alone, before dining alone, and he was frankly bored with surfeit of his own company as he roamed restlessly about Michael's sanctum. For the moment the big maps, for all their intrinsic excellence, did not interest him. The multitudinous knick-knacks merely irritated him. For books there was only a pile of French novels, apparently chosen for their considerable obscenity.

Ladislas dropped into a chair and filled his pipe. It had been a curious day, with its exciting opening, the appearance of Barbara, the quarrel with Michael. But it had also been quite inconclusive. Barbara had vanished, presumably into the seclusion of her own rooms. The castle was quiet. The afternoon had been blatantly uneventful. Michael and his first squadron had ridden off along the Wilno road. Ladislas had watched them parade in the courtyard before they started. And once again he felt constrained most unwillingly to admire his cousin.

This squadron indeed was a force of which any captain could be justly proud. Their steady ranks

were unspoiled by Caucasian irregulars or ex-infantry soldiers. There was, in fact, a strong nucleus of the cavalry of the old Imperial Guard, and quite fifty per cent of the rest had all been officers in the Tsar's armies. They were well armed with rifle, revolver, and sabre, and admirably mounted. Their drill and discipline appeared perfect.

They were drawn up, silent, and to Ladislas's watching eyes, very purposeful, a good ten minutes before Michael Konski came out into the courtyard and mounted Mephistopheles, the black English hunter which was his favourite charger. Marcouire was with him. The latter beckoned to Ladislas.

'It appears that the car is out of order, mon ami,' he said. 'The estimable Bill is engaged on repairs, but I cannot wait. Your cousin has offered me a mount, and his escort to Wilno. So I must go. I shall hope to see you again soon; I fear I hardly expressed my gratitude for your having saved my unworthy life.'

'Nonsense,' said Ladislas awkwardly.

They shook hands. Marcouire mounted his horse.

'Au revoir, cousin,' cried Michael. 'Fours right. Walk march. Trot!'

The squadron clattered and jingled out of the courtyard, Michael Konski at its head, towering over the leading files. Marcouire, his blue tunic the only gay spot of colour in the column, looked the merest boy beside him — a boy playing at soldiers.

And Ladislas wished very heartily for a moment that the Frenchman was still with him, instead of the precise and almost unreal Sturm with his cropped hair, his eyeglass, and his jerky movements. But the naval lieutenant apparently had no desire to inflict his company upon Ladislas longer than was absolutely necessary. He murmured something about pickets, and walked away down the path into the woods. No doubt the ruffians of the second squadron, who formed now the castle garrison, needed a watchful eye.

So Ladislas had been left to his own devices. He had taken the opportunity to make a tour of the immediate environs of the castle, this time unmolested by officiousness on the part of the obsequious sentries, who had presumably been warned by Sturm of his presence and his connection with the garrison. But he had met with neither adventure nor mystery. There were two strong pickets at the two bridges across the Niemen; a chain of sentries circled the whole demesne; and the main body of the second squadron was camped at the block-house where the two roads forked. Beyond the bridge which carried the road towards Grodno, he had observed the clustered hovels and ruined church which formed the village of Konski. But a distant view of a priest, two or three villagers, and a straggling family of pigs, had not tempted Ladislas to cross the river to make their closer acquaintance.

Sitting there smoking in Michael's room, Ladislav achieved more and more the positive conviction that he must be dreaming the whole affair. Warsaw seemed as far away as London. His mission had been reduced by his cousin's strong hand to that of a pillar-box. To sit still and smoke a pipe on the frontiers of Red Russia was insane. But what else could he do? For Michael he had this extraordinary mixture of loathing and admiration: the first for his blatant cruelty and probable perversion; the second for the way in which he handled his cut-throats, and had succeeded in maintaining himself and his men in a debateable land beside which the Border was a mediæval joke. But if Michael was the cruellest devil unhung, still there seemed no doubt of his anti-Bolshevik sentiments. . . .

'For two pins I'd chuck it, and go back to Warsaw,' he muttered. Then he remembered his sight of 'Bill' that afternoon fumbling blasphemously in the Cadillac's entrails. Retreat for the moment was out of the question.

He got out of the chair and moved to the window. The moon had risen behind the castle, so full and golden, in appearance so near, that it seemed as if it were some fantastic lantern hung between earth and sky. The deep shadow of the castle darkened the river-bank. But beyond its edge the Niemen flowed tranquil and shining as the silver tissue of a ball-dress. The greenish silver light bathed all the

country to the north. And without tree or hill, with no gleam of light or fire from the village, the effect was of the country of a dream. The stillness was absolute, and Ladislas, looking into a distance only limited by indifferent eyesight, felt a frightened pigmy in his isolation, fronting the cold and the barbarism and the spaces of northeastern Europe.

A hand touched his arm, and he spun round as though he had been shot, feeling automatically for the catch of his holster. Then he laughed, not quite naturally.

It was Barbara. She looked very different now, with the moonlight on her face, her hair uncovered and gleaming, in the simplest of evening frocks — silver and jade-green.

‘Did I frighten you? I’m sorry.’

‘Not so much — the general atmosphere,’ said Ladislas. ‘I wanted company badly.’

‘You put it baldly, but it must serve,’ said Barbara. ‘I warn you I intend to stay for a little.’

The dim light softened the hardness in her features, so that she seemed very young, very much the ingénue with a suspicion of the minx.

‘Won’t you sit down?’ asked Ladislas, knocking out his pipe.

‘Don’t do that — give me a cigarette,’ said the girl. ‘Why not light the lamps?’

‘I’m afraid I still retain an adolescent love of moonlight.’

Barbara stiffened.

'Will you be serious for a minute?' she asked abruptly.

'Of course.'

'You won't laugh at me, or be rude to me?'

'Please, Barbara ——'

'Oh, I know I sound odd. You mustn't mind or take any notice. Now it's not my business, and I don't know or care why you're here, cousin Ladislás. But will you do something for me?'

'If I can — of course.'

'Well, you can! I want you to go back to Warsaw to-morrow morning. There you have it!'

She leaned back in her chair, and blew a ring of smoke towards the invisible ceiling.

There was a pause.

'I'm afraid that's not possible,' said Ladislás quietly.

'Why not?'

The parry was sharp as a sword-cut.

'To start with, the car is out of order ——'

'Your man will have it ready before midday. He's just told me.'

Ladislás shrugged.

'I'm here on a job,' he said.

Barbara flung the half-smoked cigarette viciously at the fireplace. 'I suppose you think me a damned fool of a young girl playing at being in a novelette!' she cried. 'I'm not, you know! I don't know why I

bother — yes, I do, though, I like you, Ladislas. You remind me of honest, comprehensible things; of England, to put it bluntly. Your pathetic shyness with an unknown female; the way you knocked out your pipe — your puzzled determination not to admit you're scared stiff! I like you. I don't want you to end your young life in this inferno. I know it — you don't. I've lived here — you haven't. You must go, Ladislas, to please me.'

'Does your husband know you are warning me?' asked Ladislas hesitatingly.

'If you mean, am I doing this at his dictation to get you out of his way, I'm not!' snapped Barbara.

'Please — I beg your pardon. But as you said, I'm puzzled,' said Ladislas. 'But, you know, I can't go. I've got my orders.'

'To coöperate with Michael, or spy on him?' sneered Barbara. 'I don't mean it unpleasantly. But if either is your job, your job can't be done. Michael plays a lone hand. You'll get in his way. Then you'll be killed. I'm telling you the truth, not trying to frighten you.'

'Thank you,' smiled Ladislas.

Barbara's decision, animation, the swift movement of her slim, capable hands, combined with the extreme youthfulness of her appearance, were most attractive. So much so that any vague possibility of his leaving the castle vanished at that moment.

'Why do *you* stay here?' he asked suddenly.

Her body went perfectly rigid in the chair.

““And the twain shall become one flesh!”” she retorted lightly. ‘Are you forgetting I’m married?’

‘I was remembering to whom you are married,’ replied Ladislás. His eyes met hers without shifting, as she raised her head.

‘I’m not playing the misunderstood and miserable wife this journey,’ she said.

Ladislás thrust home.

‘Hardly necessary, when it has become second nature, my dear Barbara.’

She flinched a little.

‘I made my own choice. I regret nothing,’ she said firmly after a pause.

‘Then if you can stick it for choice, I can do the same for orders,’ said Ladislás. ‘Have another cigarette?’

Barbara jumped up, paced the room restlessly, and stood facing the mantelpiece.

‘D’you know the story of this sword?’ she said, fingering the rusty sabre that hung at the level of her eyes.

Ladislás shook his head.

‘It belonged to Michael’s grandfather, Stanislas Konski,’ said Barbara in level tones. ‘He posed prettily like you and refused to run away. The Russians shot him. But he was an old man. You’re too young for such nonsense, and I’m not a good enough audience.’

'I know the story,' said Ladislás. 'So that is his sword?'

He crossed to the fireplace, and stood beside Barbara, running a finger along the rust-stained blade.

Barbara laid a hand on his arm.

'You'll go, Ladislás, won't you?'

'I will not.'

He looked down at her, suddenly acutely conscious of her physical nearness and of her beauty. But she made no sign to indicate that she appreciated any change in the manner of his gaze. With a laugh she went back to her chair.

'Well, I've done my little best,' she said lightly. 'And now, how can I entertain my cousin? As we are to be companions for some days, we must start well. Perhaps it would avoid any chance of misunderstanding in the future if I take this opportunity of telling you the history of my early struggles. You're still comparatively a stranger, my dear Ladislás. Politeness will compel you to listen. Shyness will prevent you from being ostentatiously sympathetic. What do you say?'

'May I refill and light my pipe?' asked Ladislás meekly.

'You may. And I expect there's a bottle of vodka in the cupboard.'

'That,' said Ladislás, 'may come in handy later.'

Barbara laughed.

CHAPTER VIII

BARBARA TALKS

BARBARA LATHAM, though none would have thought it to look at her strong body and her clear-cut features, was an old man's child. But she had been anything but that old man's darling. Her father, Sir Godfrey Latham, had sealed a mad career by marrying, at the age of fifty-seven, the daughter of one of his neighbours, who had grown rich by successful speculation while Sir Godfrey grew poor by gambling. Why he had married only God knew. It may have been the fact that either he must marry or sell Five Ashes left him no alternative. For, if Sir Godfrey loved anything besides himself it was that old Devonshire house, the trees in which the owls cried at dusk, the red cliffs, and the distant view of the Channel.

His marriage saved these things for him. And at the end of a year his wife died when Barbara was born.

Sir Godfrey was a hard man. In his youth he had wasted three years in a cavalry regiment, five in travel. Then he had settled down to hunt deer and foxes, insult his neighbours, and celebrate the incoming of his quarterly dividends by trips to Monte Carlo. It was on one of those periodical visits that

his only sister Frances had succumbed to the attractions of — of all nationalities to choose — a Russian prince; married him out of hand; and left Sir Godfrey to return home alone.

‘Best gambler I ever met — damn him!’ was his summing-up of Prince Andrew Bolkonsky, after that polished Muscovite had relieved him alike of his sister and some three thousand pounds inside of a week.

Similarly his response to the doctor’s nervous congratulations upon the survival of his daughter, mingled with even more nervous condolences upon the death of his wife, was not encouraging to that well-meaning but ordinary practitioner.

‘A son — damn it, I wanted a son!’ Sir Godfrey had cried furiously. ‘What the devil can I do with a girl? Only one use for them I ever knew!’

‘But your wife, Sir Godfrey ——’

‘You say she is dead! Well — she lived an uncomplaining fool! I can’t help it if she’s died one! I’m no hypocrite, sir, to affect a sorrow I don’t feel! Take a glass of wine, and don’t talk!’

So Barbara Latham grew up with a succession of nurses of average competence, and luckily more than average kindness. Of her father she remembered little, except the savage joy on his red weather-beaten face when she had burst into tears on being ‘blooded’ at the age of seven. She owed him nothing but the possession of a fiery temper, the physical horror of the sight and smell of blood which that

incident of childhood had stamped ineradicably upon her mind, and her seat on a horse. He had insisted that she should ride almost before she could walk. But except when they had ridden or eaten together, she had hardly seen Sir Godfrey in the seventeen years during which she had shared his house. He had been glad to educate her expensively, send her to Paris to be 'finished,' watch her leave Five Ashes on visits to her friends. But she knew that she was a nuisance to him, while she could expect less affection than any of the dogs that were at his heels all day. He was not actively unkind to her. She should have been a boy, that was all. He did not know how to, nor care to try to, appreciate a daughter. And she became hardened, cynically philosophical, before she put up her hair. Also she found the company her father would not or could not give her, in reading everything on which she could lay hands. Five Ashes was little more than a cluster of lumber-rooms. Its collection of printed matter was amazingly catholic. And Barbara was surprised at school and in Paris to find that her confounding knowledge of the Bible, 'The Arabian Nights,' 'Don Quixote,' Rabelais, the 'Decameron,' and the dramatists of the Renaissance and the Restoration, profoundly shocked her mistresses, while it made her the envy of companions whose adolescent outlook on life she naturally despised as callow, and dismissed as humbug.

In June, 1914, three things happened suddenly. She became seventeen. Her father died, as he dismounted after a long day in the saddle. And far away in Bosnia an Austrian Archduke, of whom Barbara had never heard, was made the target of bombs and an automatic pistol.

That assassination seemed to affect Barbara as little as all those other thousands of average people who lived the daily round and read the sporting news in the papers, until they — or their men relations — went to enlist and to die. The immediate question for her was where and how to live. A girl of seventeen could hardly go on living alone at Five Ashes, even if she had wanted to. And Barbara had no desire to do so. Five Ashes was expensive and uncomfortable to live in, and redolent of her father's depressing personality. She in her turn refused to play the hypocrite so far as to mourn for his death, though she had the grace and common-sense not to show the relief it gave her. But she was at a loose end till a letter, fascinatingly stamped, appeared as if from nowhere upon her plate at breakfast a fortnight after Sir Godfrey's funeral.

Her aunt, Frances Bolkonsky, whom she had never seen, wrote inviting her to Saint Petersburg. She could offer her niece an amusing time, a pleasant set, and she would love to look after her until Barbara should reach an age to decide for herself what she wanted to do and where she wanted to live.

Barbara jumped at the opportunity. The mere idea of Russia was mysteriously attractive. Her father's description of her uncle, Prince Andrew, prejudiced Barbara in his favour. For she had inherited his love of a gambler, and loved a good loser. In any event, could there be any question of choosing between Saint Petersburg and Five Ashes?

She arrived in the Russian capital the first week in July. The Bolkonskys lived in a magnificent house on the English Quay, and little filtered through into those quiet rooms of industrial trouble among the factory workers or of the rising popular feeling against Austria. Prince Andrew was a little disappointing to Barbara. If he had once been a rake, he was now thoroughly reformed, though he still looked immensely distinguished with prematurely white hair cut en brosse, a stiff little pointed beard, and rimless glasses. He moved, albeit very lazily, on the fringe of the Court circle, and the talk at his table those July evenings was all of the approaching visit of the French President to the capital. He took a great fancy to his pretty niece, for his wife, very unlike Sir Godfrey in her stout, well-corseted placidity, had given him no children. And it was beside him and from his carriage that Barbara watched the last peace-time Imperial Review at Krasnoe, when the troops marched past before the Tsar, the French President, and the Imperial Family. And on that hot Tuesday, July 23, 1914, she must have set eyes

for the first time upon Captain Michael Ivanovich Konski of the Imperial Guard Cossacks. For she turned to her uncle with a cry of admiration for their horsemanship, their scarlet uniforms, and their fluttering pennons, as they went by at the gallop. And Michael Konski rode that day at the head of his squadron.

It was two nights later that she met him face to face. The Bolkonskys gave a ball in honour of an old French friend of theirs who was with the President's suite. For the first time in her life Barbara faced the glitter, the melody, the conflicting perfumes, all the excitement and glamour of a great ball. And it was just after midnight, after two hours of intoxicating success, won in open fight by her beauty of body and quickness of mind, that Michael Konski was presented to her by a brother-officer, a distant cousin of Prince Andrew's.

At that time Michael was a man in the prime of life. He was rich, successful, popular, except that he was notorious as a duellist on small provocation. His other reputation — for gallantries — did him no harm in the eyes of the society in which he moved. Before the war he was clean-shaven, and looked younger than his age, tall and magnificently proportioned. In full-dress uniform he looked superb — and he knew it. He could be amusing. He undoubtedly had brains. And that night he spared neither wit nor cleverness.

Barbara admitted frankly that he carried her off her feet. It was not surprising. Her experience of men had been practically nil. And Michael, strangely attracted by a youth which was not raw, and a beauty which was not calculated — a man whose two great interests were horses and women, and who had little to learn about either — spared no pains to captivate her interest, and sap the virginal defences of her affections.

Twice they met at balls. Once they rode together at Gatchina. Once they went together in the evening to one of the islands of the Neva at dusk, when the sunset made the world an enchanted place of dying colours and insubstantial shapes.

What were Michael's real intentions at that time it was impossible to tell. He was ordered to the front two days after that visit to the islands, when he had implied everything without saying a word of love. When he left Saint Petersburg she was violently interested and attracted by him. When he returned wounded, it was inevitable that she should fall in love with him.

Her aunt Frances, discovering that she visited Michael daily in hospital, talked to her seriously.

'I love him,' replied Barbara simply, and continued her visits.

Such a rash confession put the fat in the fire. Michael had said nothing, and could do nothing, being in bed with a perforated shoulder. But his past

rose like flies roused from filth. Within a week Barbara heard of Michael's duelling — and rather admired him for it; of his gambling, with which she sympathised; and of five several mistresses, two still current, apart from innumerable amorous adventures, which did not interest her, coming as they did by purely feminine report.

Then Michael left hospital, and two days before he was due to return to Galicia, he asked Barbara to meet him again in the Park at Gatchina for a ride.

Barbara was late for her rendezvous, took a short cut, and came to it from the quarter opposite to that from which Michael expected her. Michael was riding a young charger he had just bought — a tall chestnut with an uncertain temper. Kept standing by Michael at his rendezvous, the horse had fretted and stamped himself into a fever of excitement, and just as Barbara sighted Michael between the trees, and opened her lips to call to him, the chestnut, startled by some cracking twig or persistent fly, began to rear and plunge. Michael had not been on a horse since his wound. He was taken unawares, his shoulder hurt him, and he was thrown. He was on his feet in a flash, and back in the saddle before Barbara could believe the evidence of her eyes that he had fallen. Next instant she had pulled up her mare, convinced that she was insane. Below her, very clear in the brilliant sunshine, Michael Konski was flogging his horse madly with his riding-whip.

He was like a madman. His blows fell impartially on the beast's head, neck, flanks, and quarters. And he struck and struck with a savage, silent intensity of fury that was incredible.

Barbara sat watching, white to the lips. Then she shook her reins and galloped down the slope, wincing at the hard, dull sounds of the heavy crop on the horse's hide.

'Michael! For God's sake, stop it!' she cried.

Michael wrenched wildly at the reins, pulling the horse rearing onto its hind legs; smashed a final blow onto its muzzle to bring it to earth; dismounted. His face was still distorted, and he was trembling all over. Behind him his mount stood, also trembling, foam-flecked, gasping, with cruel blood patches on the flanks. Michael had spared his spurs as little as his whip.

'I don't think that brute will ever throw me again,' he said quietly.

'Is that all you have to say?' asked Barbara. She could hardly get out the words.

Michael laughed gaily. 'I'm afraid this infernal horse put the common courtesy of "How are you?" out of my head.'

'You don't propose to explain?'

'Explain what, my dear Barbara?'

'How dare you?' cried Barbara. 'Please realise, Captain Konski, that I never want to see you or speak to you again.'

Michael started.

'I thought we were riding together this morning —' he said slowly.

'Do you realise that I've just seen you thrashing a horse in a way that would disgrace a South Sea Islander?'

Barbara was furious to feel her lips quivering, and hear her voice going shrill and ineffective.

'I'd never ridden the brute before,' said Michael. 'He'll give no more trouble now he knows his master.'

The girl looked down at him in horror.

'I believe you are mad,' she said, gathering up her reins. 'Good-bye, Captain Konski.'

She began to turn her mare. With one stride Michael was at the horse's head, gripping the reins.

'It is you who are mad, Barbara!' he cried. 'God in heaven, you must know! I love you!'

'Let go!' said Barbara hoarsely.

'We were made for each other! I love you as I never dreamed I could love a woman! I would even marry you!'

'You unutterable beast!'

'Come off that damned mare!' snarled Michael.

Barbara rose in her stirrups.

'I warned you,' she said, and deliberately struck downwards with her whip.

Michael flung up his arm, but the lash curled round and cut him across the temple. When he dropped his hand again, the fury had died out of his

eyes; his long, bony face was an expressionless mask, as though the Tartar strain in his Slav blood had been brought to the surface by the blow. His spurs clicked together. He bowed.

‘Au revoir, Miss Latham,’ he said quietly.

It was a picture that stayed long in Barbara’s mind: the sunlit sky, the scattered trees of the park, and, in the foreground, Michael’s set face, in its absurd frame of khaki cap and high collar, above wide gold epaulettes, and black riding-boots. . . .

Suddenly she felt frightened. She wrenched at the mare’s mouth, and rode away at a canter without looking back.

CHAPTER IX

INTERLUDE

BARBARA paused in her story abruptly. Ladislav was sitting quite still in his chair, his left hand gripping his knees. His pipe had gone out, and was being twisted to and fro between the fingers of his other hand. The room had grown too dark for her to distinguish the expression on his face, but she knew that he was staring very fixedly at her, completely absorbed by the story. He was a good listener, she decided unconsciously. She had heard his teeth gritting together when she spoke of Michael's treatment of his horse. Apart from that he had remained quite silent.

She moved to the window and looked out at the Niemen. It reminded her of the old days when she had looked out at the Channel from the long windows of Five Ashes, and at the Neva from her uncle's house on the English Quay. She felt curiously old.

'Please go on,' came Ladislav's voice out of the darkness behind her.

'Shall I?' murmured Barbara. 'I don't think confession is good for the soul. It's too much of a spiritual vice in its self-indulgence.'

‘Please go on,’ repeated Ladislas.

So Barbara turned back from her vision of the river, and spoke, her figure now dim, but still graceful, silhouetted against the moonlit window.

CHAPTER X

CHOOSING A BED

HER dismissal of Michael Konski closed the first chapter of Barbara's life in Russia. It also ended her girlhood. For the first time she had been compelled to decide a matter of vital importance for herself. And she set herself to cut all remembrance of the first man she had ever loved out of her heart with the steady resolution with which she was accustomed to take purely physical fences.

But she might have found it a harder task than she had anticipated if it had not been for a little musician called Andrei Petrovich Sverdlov, who appeared next day at luncheon at Prince Andrew's. It seemed that he had been an old friend of the Prince's, who had long before passed out of his ken and taken to a successful if unexciting livelihood of teaching music in Lodz. Now the Germans were in Lodz, and Sverdlov was a penniless refugee. Prince Andrew had met him by hazard amidst the smoke and confusion of the Warsaw Station, and had offered him hospitality.

Andrei Petrovich was a silent, timid little man in steel-rimmed spectacles. He might have been any age between forty and sixty-five. He was rather bald, very thin, ate greedily and noisily, and smiled

almost all the time. His only clothes seemed to be a very ancient student's uniform with bright buttons which he kept most carefully polished. He was ineffective and absurd, and a little pathetic in his bewildered gratitude. But his violin-playing was superb. And it was after hearing him play that Barbara went impulsively to her aunt and asked if she could have lessons from him.

Frances Bolkonsky was only too delighted. Barbara had been in disgrace since the talk about her hospital visits. And it was pleasant to get the opportunity of killing two birds with one stone: of keeping her niece out of mischief, and getting work for poor Andrei. The Princess had never quite learned to appreciate her husband's essentially Russian habit of keeping open house. And Andrei's manners were such that while she was sorry for him, and was eager to obtain him a living, she jumped at a chance of helping him without having to keep him in the house. There were good cheap lodgings to be had not too far away. . . .

The lessons were a great success. Sverdlov taught well, and Barbara displayed a remarkable aptitude, encouraged by her rigid determination. Music, save for the abomination of an old-pattern pianola, had not existed inside the walls of Five Ashes. And Sir Godfrey had not seen fit to include it among the extras of his daughter's education. So now she plunged into it with reckless abandon, leaving the

pale shadow of Michael Konski unregarded behind her. She did not even know where he was. And it was not long before she could truthfully say that she did not care. She practised four or five hours a day. She went to the Ballet. She heard Chaliapin sing in the Narodny Dom. And thus she became enclosed and enthralled in a new world of her own. It was insignificant that the war went on; that the Russian armies, lacking rifles and ammunition, fought with bombs and bayonets and clubs, while the German artillery blasted them out of Galicia, out of Poland; that bread grew scarce while strikes grew frequent; that men murmured against the Empress and Rasputin, and whispered of palace conspiracies; that Prince Andrew seemed older and her aunt less placid; that it was said openly that before the ice broke on the Neva in 1917 there must be either Peace or Revolution.

Barbara was roused from her dreamy isolation by the melodrama of the 29th December. She had been practising most of the morning, had lunched alone in her room, and expected Sverdlov to give her a lesson in the afternoon. But he did not come. At last, tired of waiting, she went downstairs to the drawing-room, and to her intense indignation saw him talking to Prince Andrew by the tea-table.

Her indignation, however, found no words. They were checked by the sight of her uncle's face. It was the colour of grey paper, and he was fingering his

beard with fingers that shook uncontrollably. Beside him a young Cossack officer, the same who had presented Michael Konski to Barbara, was talking eagerly, his features alight with animation.

‘—— if he is really dead, then Russia is saved!’ he cried.

‘Who is dead?’ asked Barbara from the doorway. Her uncle looked up.

‘Andrei Petrovich tells us that Rasputin has been killed at last,’ he said.

And Barbara heard the story of that fantastically Byzantine night in the great yellow palace on the Moika; how the monk ate poisoned cakes and drank poisoned wine without effect; how Prince Yussupoff shot him point-blank with the Grand Duke Dmitri’s revolver; how he went to his companions with the news; how, when they started down the staircase to view the corpse, they saw Rasputin mounting the stairs, threatening them with his curses and the Imperial anger; and how, finally, Purishkevich had finished the murderous work in the palace garden.

‘They told the investigating police they had been killing a mad dog,’ said Prince Andrew. ‘God send they have not brought down Russia with that dog’s death!’

‘It means the end of that cursed pro-German camarilla about the Court!’ said the young Cossack. Prince Andrew smiled grimly.

‘You are young and accordingly optimistic,’ he re-

plied. 'I am an old man. I know the Government of Russia to be what it is — an imposing façade. This opens a crack. The whole thing may crumble. People abuse the Tsardom. I have not yet been convinced that for Russia there is any alternative system that will work.'

It was the excitement, the picturesqueness of those winter days, rather than their political significance, which gave Barbara interests alternative to her music. Besides, Sverdlov, his memories of old student days preserved deep in his heart to warm his chilling blood, seemed in spirit less with Barbara and his violin than with the crowds in the street, who seemed to wait and watch for something new, something terrible and strange. The atmosphere was thick with rumours, opinions, and stories, which convinced Barbara more and more that she had left Five Ashes for Ruritania rather than Russia. How was one to believe in the civilisation, even the actuality, of a country whose Minister of the Interior was a convinced spiritualist, who was credibly reported to seek political guidance from the ghosts of Emperors long dead; whose Imperial Family attended the midnight funeral service of an illiterate, unwashed, sensual monk, when he was buried secretly in a silver coffin in the Park of Tsarskoe Selo? A palace revolution was predicted as soon as the Emperor should return from the front. People who knew apparently concentrated all their attention

upon dynastic changes. The death of Rasputin seemed to have destroyed the mystery and silence which had cloaked and guarded Nicholas II and his wife for so long. Such curiosity as remained unsatisfied by these intriguing speculations looked towards the armies and the German advance. There seemed none left to watch the ever-lengthening bread-queues in the streets, the occasional Cossack patrols, the secret planting of machine guns on roofs by the police, and the blatant lack of discipline among the recruits who made up the great majority of the Petrograd garrison.

That period of tension and expectation of the unknown lasted two months. It was March 8th before the first bread-shop was looted in the poorer quarters of the city, after an old woman had begun the Russian Revolution by hurling a stone through the shop window. That final portent was disregarded as so many others had been before it. Then in the cold grey light of March 12th the storm broke. The police and the Cossacks patrolling the Nevsky Prospekt were reënforced by the Guard regiments of the garrison. The Preobrajenski Regiment promptly mutinied, and shot down its officers. The Ismailov-sky Regiment fraternised with the populace and turned its weapons against the police. Rodzianko, President of the Duma, sent his famous final appeal to the Emperor. And far away in Switzerland, lean refugees from Siberia read the news and packed their

scanty belongings. The day for which they had endured their lives so long had dawned at last.

Things happened so rapidly, so kaleidoscopically, in those spring days that Barbara lived through them with a vision that she knew to be grotesquely out of perspective. She saw the Nevski bare but for patrols; the motor-lorries that thundered aimlessly about the city, bristling with rifles like absurd hedgehogs, packed with soldiers, workmen, and women who sang and cheered, wore grimy handkerchiefs about their necks, and fluttered innumerable dirty red flags; she saw the eagles torn from the gates of the Winter Palace; she saw a Cossack dragged from his horse and butchered by the Troitzky bridge; she saw the slim spire of the fortress of Saint Peter and Saint Paul rising against gold and crimson sunsets, sublimely indifferent to the fact that a dirty crimson rag had replaced the black and yellow on its flagstaff. She became used to perpetual intermittent firing; to the petty discomforts inseparable from what was practically a state of siege; to her aunt's querulous bewilderment; and her uncle's grimly philosophic acquiescence. Her mind retained very few vivid pictures: her first sight of a man struck by a chance shot; a Cossack dragging a miserable policeman out of a crowd, flinging him across his saddle, and galloping clear away down the Nevski, with the snow spurting in silver showers beneath his horse's hoofs; snow reddened by wine, and covered with the

fragments of broken bottles; a woman walking very slowly in the dusk along the Quay, crying, and quite mad. Such cameos were hopelessly blurred, and the majority swept into oblivion by the gradual process which turned Barbara from a spectator of the agony of Saint Petersburg into the protagonist of her own tragedy.

First her aunt died, quite quietly in her sleep, of heart failure. Frances Bolkonsky had always lived well. And in Saint Petersburg that good living, with its trimmings of much bridge, more scandal, and most small-talk, had submerged a personality pleasant and kindly enough, but always negative rather than positive. Sir Godfrey had absorbed all the positive qualities of the Lathams. The abdication of Nicholas II had meant literally the end of her world. For a little she was puzzled, querulous, and indignant. Then she realised the facts and died. There was nothing else for her to do.

With her death Prince Andrew became even more a grey, unhappy ghost, talking little, and that little very bitterly. He had made one or two half-hearted attempts to induce his niece to leave him and go back to England. But Barbara had grown fond of the old man, and could not bear to contemplate the thought of leaving him alone in his great house with his memories. One night he told her that he had asked Sverdlov to come back and live with them again.

‘He is company for you, my dear — and known for a good republican,’ he added bitterly. ‘I am too old to suffer manfully the end of everything in which I have believed. I believed in our class as a ruling caste. And I have seen a Grand Duke leading his men under the red flag to take the oath of allegiance to the Republic, and officers giving up their swords to their own soldiers without a struggle. Even the Emperor’s personal guards did not lift a hand in his defence. I have lived too long.’

To Barbara he never spoke directly of politics again.

But in July, after the first abortive endeavour of the Bolsheviks to oust Kerensky and seize the reins of government, Barbara found an officer in khaki with her uncle in the dining-room. She blushed hotly and bit her lips, for it was Michael Konski. She had not spoken of that scene in the Park at Gatchina to a soul, and she had wiped his memory from her mind. She was furious that ordinary hospitality compelled her thus to meet him again across a luncheon-table.

Michael, however, hardly seemed to notice her presence — which piqued her. He looked worn and haggard. His uniform was stained and dusty. He ate and drank greedily, and poured out a torrent of words, striking the polished table continually with his clenched fist so that the glasses rang, stabbing the air with an emphatic forefinger.

‘Can nothing be done, here in the capital?’ he de-

manded. 'I tell you, Prince, with the armies it is the madness of hell! That damned order No. 1, and these blasted soldiers' committees! No discipline, no orders, no ammunition! I've come straight from Kornilov's Stavka. They say there is to be an offensive within a few days. The idea is insanity! The men won't march, let alone fight. We ask for reserves and munitions and guns, and we get some damned commissary dressed up in uniform who talks of the blessings of Liberty and Internationalism!'

Michael's eyes glinted, and his lips curled savagely.

'When the Tsar abdicated I resigned my commission,' he went on more quietly. 'I withdrew my resignation when the Provisional Government declared that they would get on with the war; that the prosecution of the war was the cause of the Revolution; and that they had the support of England and France. Lies and humbug! Kerensky has ruined the army, and peace propaganda is everywhere! I was with Kornilov when he rode into Moscow with his Caucasians and told Kerensky what he had done. But for him I would never wear a sword again!'

'My dear boy,' said Prince Andrew soothingly. 'Believe me, I know what you feel. But I exist no longer. What do you think I can do?'

Michael frowned, and caught Barbara's eye. She was watching him intently. 'You can give a hungry man a capital meal, Prince,' he said with a smile.

'I doubt if I shall even be able to do that much longer,' retorted Prince Andrew. 'Come, tell me why you are here in Petersburg?'

He had refused flatly to conform to the changing of Saint Petersburg to Petrograd in the early days of hostilities, insisting that it was merely puerile to substitute a parvenu name for one of historical significance and traditions, and that such puerilities had nothing to do with the waging of war.

Michael Konski paused and sipped his wine deliberately before he spoke again. 'Nothing can save the situation but a military dictatorship,' he said at last.

'Entendu. Go on, Captain Konski. I can answer for my niece's discretion. Nothing you say will go outside the walls of this room.'

'The honour of Miss Latham's acquaintance assures me of that,' said Michael formally, with the suspicion of a malicious smile.

Prince Andrew for once in his life looked momentarily out of countenance. 'Of course — yes — for the moment I had forgotten,' he stammered.

'There is really nothing to tell,' interrupted Michael curtly. 'I hope to test the feeling here in the capital with respect to the possibility of a dictatorship for Kornilov — or Kerensky, damn him.'

'Please treat my house as your own,' said Prince Andrew a little stiffly. 'After all, Captain Konski, we are related. My great-aunt Olga Petrovna, who

owned a property near Kieff, was third cousin to your grandmother on your mother's side.'

'I am deeply grateful,' said Michael; he did not add whether for the curiously involved relationship, which would have been unknown or at least ignored outside Russia, or for Prince Andrew's offer of hospitality. Again he looked at Barbara. Across the gleaming surface of the table she faced him, her eyes bright with resentment and wounded pride.

Frankly she was scared by Michael's inclusion in the household, so that, when he apparently did his best to make things easy for her in awkward circumstances, a little inevitable gratitude crept in to dim her vivid recollection of him as a monstrously cruel brute. He never forced his company upon her. He was forbearing towards Sverdlov, who had not the common-sense to avoid, nor the savoir-faire to conceal, an obvious dislike of him. He spent most of his time on secret errands, going about the city. He seemed preoccupied, and was inhumanly silent. It may have been that with the city once more filled with apprehension and excitement, its eyes turned nervously from the Germans without to the rivals within the front of the crumbling armies of Russia, Michael Konski was too busy dictator-making to bother his mind with a private vendetta, whose object was a girl, and a foreigner at that.

If it was so, he was deluding himself with vain dreams. No cavalry captain, however daring and

unscrupulous, could succeed in a task which was breaking the hearts and immolating the bodies of the ablest men in Russia. There was no time in which to plan or execute. At the end of July, Kerensky launched his boasted offensive. Within a week that last straw had broken the camel's back. The southern front opened, went fluid, ran like water. And Russian troops, who for three years had been the wonder of Europe for naked heroism, became an armed rabble of a type unparalleled in the history of the world for cowardice, treachery, and cruelty.

For the moment Michael almost rejoiced. His prophecies of the inevitable results of Kerensky's rule were justified. Surely now, in sheer naked need, Russia must turn from the mouthing dreamer to the fighting general. But Michael, for all his upbringing and regimental life, was half a Pole. He had not fathomed the inertia, the unthinking, casual drift, which is the Russian's favourite attitude to life and crisis alike. He was about to rejoin Kornilov in September when the news came that the General had played his hand, and was marching on the capital.

Next morning Barbara was in the hall, preparing to go out, when Michael's orderly entered with a message. She called out to Michael up the stairs, and he ran down in great strides, spurs and sword jingling. She noticed he was dressed to go out. He snatched the envelope from the orderly and tore it

open with feverish movements. His eyes widened, his lips worked. The paper was torn and torn again into shreds. To Barbara it was obvious that he had read disaster in those hastily scrawled lines, though she could have no idea of the amazing folly, treason, and weakness which had conspired to wreck Kornilov's attempt, and with it the last hope of Russia.

'My God!' raved Michael. 'Hadn't he one man to trust to lead the Caucasians in and string Kerensky to a lamp-post? If only the Bolsheviks can fight and command, I go to the Bolsheviks!'

His eyes were blazing as they had blazed that morning in the Park at Gatchina. They fell on Barbara standing white and still at the bottom of the staircase.

'This is the work of your damned Western democracies!' he flung at her. And with that he whipped out his sword, broke it over his knee, and hurled the fragments across the hall.

'Get out, you staring fool!' he yelled to the stolid orderly.

As the soldier obeyed, Prince Andrew appeared in the doorway of the dining-room.

'Kornilov has failed,' said Michael. 'I must thank you, Prince, and wish you farewell. Russia has chosen, it seems, to go to the devil! I am going with her. You, mademoiselle,' he added softly, 'I shall see again. Lately I have been too busy pro-

perly to appreciate the claims of beauty.' He saluted, and turned on his heel. The door slammed. And, as the echoes died away in the great house, Barbara could hear in the street the thunder of passing lorries and the raucous singing of the 'Marseillaise' by Red Guards. She sat down on the stairs, limp and exhausted. Prince Andrew mechanically picked the broken sword off the floor of the hall.

'His father Ivan, the Pole, was a curious man,' said the Prince quietly, talking casually to soothe his niece's nerves. 'I served with him for a year or two in the Chevaliers Gardes. An ugly devil, Ivan Konski; silent, and always afraid of the dark. I believe he witnessed his father's execution in '63, and could never forget it — what is it, my dear?'

Barbara's shining head had fallen forward between her hands, and tears trickled between her fingers. Her uncle put a hand on her shoulder.

'There, there,' he said. 'Tout passe, tout lasse . . . it is true, my dear, and very consoling.'

Barbara shook herself like a dog emerging from a pond.

'I'm sorry, uncle darling,' she said, looking up at Prince Andrew. 'He frightened me.'

'You 've seen the last of him,' said her uncle firmly.

In his own mind he felt that more truthfully Michael Konski had seen the last of them. With Kornilov gone, Kerensky would never be able to

hold down Lenin and his Bolsheviki. And Red triumph meant Red terror, and, for the old governing class, death.

But Prince Andrew was not to see his apprehensions fulfilled. One evening, a month later, he went out alone to visit a friend. The usual band of drunken sailors, deserters from the Baltic fleet, was parading the streets shouting and firing their rifles. An unaimed, casual bullet struck Prince Andrew Bolkon-sky just under the heart, and killed him instantaneously.

Of his fate, except that he had left the house and not returned, Barbara was to remain ignorant for weeks. Such inadequate and scanty police arrangements as still existed had other fish to fry than the tracing of aristocrats who chose to disappear from the ken of their relatives. So the girl was left to her own devices and her own company except for the shabby figure of Sverdlov, who became daily more unreal as a mouthpiece for the most violent pro-Kerensky political sentiments.

Barbara did not know what to do. To leave Russia was already difficult. To go, while her uncle's fate was still obscure, was out of the question. Yet how could she stay? Her supply of ready money was very limited. Prince Andrew's disappearance had encouraged a staff of servants, already sceptical of the future of domestic service, to quarter its numbers and halve its efficiency. Food alone was a

problem of definite urgency. And Barbara was only nineteen and a stranger in a strange land. As to friends: Sverdlov remained amiable, but was practically futile; Michael had vanished; she had known no other Russians with anything approaching intimacy. No doubt Prince Andrew's friends would have helped her. But most of them, with that carelessness of their caste honour which had so disillusioned the old prince, had taken quick steps to flee the probable wrath to come. Those that remained had changed their addresses, or, at least, were no longer in a position to help foreign young women.

Barbara, staring out at the sluggish stream of the Neva, made a Russian virtue of Russian necessity. She faced an uncertain and dangerous future with a shrug and a smile. After all, if all the servants left, and she was utterly stranded, she could cut her hair short and join the Women's Battalion of Death. . . .

She had almost been driven to that expedient, so oddly compounded of desperation and musical-comedy, when the Bolsheviki struck for the second time, and now successfully. Kerensky's infatuated megalomania, which had driven him to insult his last disciplined force, the Cossacks, in the person of their Hetman Kaledin, reaped the whirlwind. A couple of naval brigades from the Baltic fleet were all that Trotzky needed to seize the capital, for the only people to raise a hand for Kerensky were the Women's Battalion and some military cadets. They

were butchered and the Winter Palace stormed, while Petrograd looked on almost indifferently, groping towards some renewal of the ordinary machinery of existence.

With such a groping attitude the new masters of Russia could have no sympathy. Like bicyclists they must continue to move swiftly or meet disaster. They seized and constructed, while Russia crumbled in the broken, nerveless hands of Liberals who dared not govern, and generals who dared not fight. Their methods were vile, and their complete justification is not yet. Still they knew their mind, and they achieved their aim: two things from which it is difficult to withhold a certain admiration in this imperfect world.

That November night, when Kerensky had fled into outer darkness and oblivion, and while the Red sailors mocked and maltreated the helpless women and boys who had fought at the Winter Palace, Petrograd was given up to anarchy. The Bolsheviks had destroyed. They had not yet discovered for themselves the value of discipline and order — that discovery which was within two years to make Bolshevik-governed Moscow the best policed city in Europe after London. And, during that night made hideous by fire and shooting, Michael Konski came once more into the light, with the others of that underworld into which he had plunged for concealment on the day that he had broken his sword and

renounced his honour. What were his plans the Devil only knew. It is doubtful if he knew himself. ~~He had lain in hiding in some squalid, dirty house,~~ nursing his wounded pride, his shattered career, his useless, but almost certainly real patriotism. His threat to join the Bolsheviks had proved idle, as he had realised soon enough. By birth an aristocrat, by training an officer of the Guard, Michael Konski had no possible entrée to Red circles. Later the Bolsheviks were to learn the value of aristocratic recruits and ex-regular officers. But in those early days for Michael to have gone abroad openly in the capital would have been for him to court a hideous death, probably at the hands of his own men. His keen military capacity to sense a critical moment and take advantage of it bade him ~~risk his fate on the night of Kerensky's downfall.~~ He needed money, and he was determined to leave Petrograd; to get away to south or west to join Denikin or Kornilov, if either would fight. Or, if the worst came to the worst, there was that damned great empty barrack in Poland if the Germans had not shelled or burnt it. He had furnished it, though he had never spent more than a week in it in his life. But, as he remembered it, it was no bad port in a storm — isolated and defensible. ~~His father had shunned it like the plague,~~ swearing it was haunted. . . . Michael sneered at the recollection. He had always despised the father who had probably ruined him by mixing Polish blood with

Russian in the veins of his son — always a risky combination pregnant with disaster; who had loathed the Poles he had betrayed, and feared the Russians whose boots he had licked, and whose favours he had accepted; who had gone so far as to change 'John' to 'Ivan' — pah! . . .

Money, then, followed by retirement to the shelter of the Konski castle, were Michael's aims. But he had no money when on the night of November 9th Petrograd offered opportunities to a man of no scruple and great force of will. Loot is an ugly word, but it has founded and supported many beautiful estates, as those without possessions know very well. To a small body of such landless, lawless men, who had lurked with him in the underworld, and looked to him naturally for leadership, Michael flung that symbolically golden word, like a bone to starving dogs. Just after midnight they poured at his heels along the English Quay.

For what followed there is a probable explanation, though there could be no possible excuse. Michael, whose career so far, though not irreproachable, had, at any rate, kept within the bounds conventionally set for officers and gentlemen, had deliberately turned outlaw, rebel and thief. To carry off such rôles successfully, he had called in the assistance of alcohol. Naturally with his following of riffraff, the cellars of the first house they sacked had been their most cherished and appreciated objective. And

Michael had taken the opportunity to warm his blood and blur any possible stirring of a normally quiescent conscience. In short, he was pretty drunk when his men began to batter at the door of Prince Andrew Bolkonsky's house.

Barbara had been watching from the window of her bedroom the sky reddened by spasmodic conflagrations. She had not attempted to go to sleep, torn by anxiety for her uncle's unknown fate, and roused by continual sharp bursts of firing. Alarmed by the tumult below, she went out onto the landing and looked down into the hall. She was just in time to see the door swing open, one panel shattered by a rifle-butt. On the bottom step of the staircase was Andrei Petrovich Sverdlov. He was barefooted, with his old student's coat flung over a long nightgown. She could see the glitter of light on his buttons, and the fantastic disorder of his grizzled scanty hair. He held a shot-gun grotesquely under one arm, trigger upwards.

Everything happened with the speed, the horror, the incredibility of a nightmare. Michael's men surged into the hall, fifteen or twenty strong, yelling and cursing, and brandishing torches and rifles. Michael himself was behind them at first. Barbara had no idea that he was present, let alone responsible. She stood, gripping the balustrade, transfixed with mingled excitement, fear, and stark inability to imagine what to do, while below her Sverdlov cried

out shrilly and levelled his gun. The report of its discharge echoed like a cannon-shot through the big hall. Through a smother of smoke sounded a roar of pain, the patter of pellets against the walls, shouts of anger. Followed a violent rush forward by the invaders — and suddenly, intolerably clearly, two great arms gripped Sverdlov by the shoulders, heaving him into the air, flinging him backwards into the ravening pack: into a welter of bayonets and clubbed rifles jabbing and striking. . . .

Barbara covered her face with her hands and cowered backwards. The door into her room behind her was open, and she stopped only when she felt the edge of her dressing-table hard against her body. She clutched at it to prevent herself from falling, and stood there in the dark, biting her lips to try to regain control of her shaking limbs, blinking away helpless tears of which she was unaware. . . .

The butchering of Sverdlov brought Michael to the front. He had seen from the doorway the girl's figure on the landing, and for the moment he had hung back. But with the gunshot, the scuffle, the first bloodshed — for till that moment the looting had been confined to empty houses — his instinct for leadership leaped up to combine with his alcoholic stimulation in fierce action. He dashed in among his men, nagaika in hand, ordering with oath and blow, till they cringed back from Sverdlov's mangled body, and looked at Michael furtively and

angrily like hounds at a huntsman who would rob them of their kill. He mounted two or three steps of the staircase and wheeled on them, overpowering them with his height, his ruthless decision, and his air of command.

‘Do as you please in the rooms below,’ he cried, ‘but let none of you climb this staircase without my orders! You first four — come with me!’ The four men immediately below him looked at each other hesitatingly and obeyed. They were three soldiers and a sailor. Of the soldiers, one was huge and bearded, two short, thick-set, and flat-faced. The sailor had been hit in the face by pellets from Sverdlov’s gun, and his features, already distinguished by a broken nose and three missing front teeth, were fouled with blood. All were drunk.

Barbara was roused from her stupefaction by the snapping of a switch and the glare of light in her eyes. Michael Konski was before her, swaying a little on his feet. Through the doorway peered his four retainers, hideous and menacing. The reek of clothes drenched with sweat and spirits filled the room.

She threw up her chin and faced him with the courage of helplessness and despair.

‘What do you want?’ she asked hoarsely.

Michael licked his lips.

‘I want you,’ he said.

She saw, she could almost feel, his eyes travelling over her body. She shivered.

'Unfortunately,' went on Michael slowly, as though enjoying his words, 'I am not sufficiently drunk to take you by force. Gentility of upbringing has its disadvantages. I am compelled, therefore, to ask you to make a choice — between me and my faithful servants there, who will not be restrained by any sentimental considerations in the event of your unwillingness to comply with their desires.'

Barbara heard him as if from a distance through cotton-wool. She could say nothing. But her indomitable spirit still kept her eyes steady, her lips firm.

'Do you understand me?' snarled Michael.

She remained motionless.

'God! Your damned English obstinacy that you would like called pride!'

He seized her wrist and dragged her to the door.

'Look at them, and choose!' he shouted.

The four lurched together, staring at her. Everything was going dim, fading into a blur of filth, of foul smells, of greasy skins, of monstrous bulging eyes. In turn, that blur was submerged by the smear of darkening, sticky blood across the sailor's face — that dark stickiness which had made her cry when it had been daubed across her own face at the age of seven. . . . Was it Michael Konski or Sir Godfrey Latham who was leering at her misery and panic?

She reeled, clutched at the door, and banged it to shut out the four bestial masks.

'I am complimented in your choice,' said Michael smoothly.

Barbara's attack of nausea and giddiness passed as suddenly as it had come. She turned her back on Michael, and walked like an automaton to her dressing-table.

Behind her Michael laughed, and locked the bedroom door.

CHAPTER XI

LYING ON IT

LADISLAS never knew at what point in Barbara's story he had been driven to rise from his chair and pace furtively up and down the room in the darkness, gnawing fatuously the stem of his empty pipe. But it is certain that he chose this inopportune moment to break the level flowing of her sentences by striking a match.

In the sudden flare he glimpsed her face very set and oddly pugnacious, and the dullness of her eyes, before her hands went up to shield them.

'What are you doing?' she cried.

Ladislav dropped the match and ground it savagely into Michael's thick mauve carpet.

'Sorry,' he gulped. 'It was automatic — your voice and the dark. Poland is getting on my nerves!'

Barbara laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

'I must apologise for boring you ——' she began.

He crossed the room to her and caught her by the shoulders, as if eager to convince himself that she was unreal, and her voice the mouthpiece of a nightmare. Under his hands her shoulders were very firm and smooth and cold.

'Is this all true?' he demanded.

Again Barbara laughed.

'What a pretty inventive mind you compliment me with!' she said.

'Well, what happened afterwards?'

'Do you want to hear more?'

'I want,' said Ladislas grimly, 'to feel my cousin Michael's throat between my two hands.'

'Yes — other people have shared that desire,' said Barbara meditatively, 'for some time. He manages to survive it. Oh, sit down, Ladislas! You're not in a cage at the Zoo!'

'You're incredible!'

'I'm a realist. I became one that night, Ladislas. I had to. Sit down, and I'll explain.'

She thrust him into his chair, lit one of the lamps, and got a bottle of vodka and two glasses from a cupboard.

'I think this is the moment for our drinks,' she said. 'Salut!'

Ladislas emptied his glass automatically and put it down on a little table. Barbara perched herself on the end of the sofa, and spoke above her glass.

'I suppose,' she said, 'that all young girls have a firm subconscious belief in the infallibility of authors of novels. I know I had. And at the back of my mind that ghastly night was the feeling that I was definitely cast for the part of a romantic heroine, and the belief that somehow things must work out on the novelist's lines. You see, when I heard Michael lock that door there were three possibilities. Rescue by

a hero I discounted, because I hadn't a friend in Petrograd, let alone a personable young man of gigantic physique. But either I was bound to shame Michael by my pose of courage into leaving the room, with his tail between his legs, or I would find I had called his bluff, and he would admit it and implore me to marry him after all. These two pretty possibilities were cancelled by the unromantic fact that he was drunk. Lastly, if the worst came to the worst, I would collapse fainting, and he would take advantage of my sheer physical helplessness. But I did not faint. I was too frightened. And at the same time I was loathsomely humiliated by the foul, the utterly beastly truth that physically I was fascinated by him, as I had been when I first met him. My body betrayed me actively, not passively by collapse. And my mind was vanquished by sheer panic terror.

'Of course, I didn't think it all out like that at the time. It came to me later, when I lay awake staring at the reddened sky through the uncurtained window. I had chosen my bed. I had to lie on it. I might as well face the truth. I could, at least, keep my mind pure. It was the only purity left to me.

'I suppose I can say I made the best of it. And that clarity of mind was enough to cool Michael's hot blood. For he realised that I had beaten him, after all. But he too had his sense of gesture, had Michael. Next day he sought out a priest, and we

were married. And from that day to this he has never touched me. Yes, I beat him, Ladislás.'

'But why marry him? Why stay with him?'

Barbara shrugged her shoulders.

'As I told you, I had become a realist. I had to live. I had to stay somewhere. What could I do? Alone in Russia, without money or friends, I had to choose between Michael and the streets. If I preferred Michael, is it so astonishing?'

'The whole thing's mad!' cried Ladislás. 'Mad!'

'There speaks the civilised Englishman of hotels, police, and hot-and-cold,' retorted Barbara. 'It was the return to nature from civilisation, that was all. It was extraordinary and rather horrible. But it was not mad. It was sound sense.'

'You must be hard as nails!'

'Hard? The fittest survives. Yes, I suppose I am hard, Ladislás. But do I look so hard?'

He stared at her slim body, so young and graceful in the yellow light. The thing was beyond belief. His gaze went up to her lovely drawn face and heavy-lidded eyes; the unnaturally firm setting of her jaw.

'I believe it is true,' he muttered. 'Yes, it must be true.'

With a swift movement she reached for a little mirror, framed in tortoiseshell and silver, that lay on one of the little tables, and held it up to her face.

'True? Oh, my God! You can see it, then!' she

cried suddenly. 'I couldn't convince you, but you can see it!'

The mirror fell noiselessly to the carpet, and she crumpled up on the sofa, her face buried in the cushions, moving convulsively, as though she would burrow a way out of her misery, and find refuge where she need no longer wear her intolerable armour. Then she lay still and burst into a storm of tears.

Ladislav put a hand on her shoulder, stroking her gently, dispassionately. He felt as helpless to comfort her as if she had been some sick animal he was fond of. Under his fingers he sensed her muscles tightening as she regained her taut control.

At last she lifted her head.

'I'm sorry,' she said simply, like a child ashamed of a fit of temper. 'I was a fool, and a cruel, self-indulgent fool to tell you. But I've been so lonely, so damned lonely!'

'I'm glad you have told me,' said Ladislav simply. 'Now I can help you.'

Once more Barbara laughed — that hideous, toneless laugh which his imagination heard only from damned souls.

'You're too late to mend, if that's what you're thinking of,' she said.

Ladislav took a deep breath, as though about to dive.

'Please listen to me for a moment, Barbara. As I

see it the whole thing is largely a question of environment. You must get out of this infernal country — back to England. I can help you to Warsaw. From there it will be easy.'

'You're rather a dear, but you're rather a fool, my good Ladislas! Do you suggest that I go back to Five Ashes, hunting, gossip, and plain sewing? I've ridden like a moss-trooper and seen men die! Do you picture me as a good type of English spinster? I should go mad! Besides, how do you propose to get me to Warsaw? Shall we fly, or order a tram? Do you think that beast Sturm would let us ride away together unchaperoned with his blessing? Talk sense, my dear!'

'Well,' said Ladislas, baffled, 'what are you going to do?'

'Wait upon events and cope with them as they happen. I've got used to it, ever since Michael brought me here the week of our marriage. What a honeymoon! He and I in opposite wings of the castle, and a violin-case for my hand-luggage! At first, you see, Ladislas, I was just stunned by it all. I couldn't keep on remembering what had happened. It was so fantastic. I clutched at straws to keep me afloat — interest in all kinds of silly things; the way the place was furnished, how Michael proposed to live, and my music. That really brought me to life again, for it reminded me of Andrei and my uncle and the days when I was innocent and heartless, and

Saint Petersburg was a gay city. I cried again, and the tears thawed the ice about my heart. I woke up to where I was, and what I was: an outlaw's wife in an outlaw's stronghold. And I had to grin and bear it.

'I almost admired Michael, as he gathered his men, swore them to perpetual warfare against republican Russians of every colour, disciplined and got them in hand. He left me alone too. It took me some time to realise that the ghastly cruelty which I had experienced myself at his hands and seen inflicted on his horse was the strongest thing in his life. Now he became altogether his own master, with his cruelty as his familiar spirit. . . .'

Barbara's voice had unconsciously dropped to a whisper.

'I can't speak of what I've seen here, Ladislas. I've known men — and women too — flogged to death in that courtyard. I've watched his Caucasians hold an orgy under my window, while Michael saw to it that I stood and kept my eyes open. I've seen the clearing piled with stripped corpses three deep. . . . Oh, what's the good of talking of it? In a way, I suppose, I'm salted, casual about it all in some horrible way. Yet when I come across fresh evidence, as I did when I first met you, in that clearing, it still turns me sick and giddy. But I don't see myself adorning gracefully an English countryside.'

Ladislas poured himself another glass of vodka. There seemed nothing else left to be done.

Barbara went to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

'Think of your job, not of me,' she said. 'I came to the conclusion a long time ago now that no individual matters very much. I know I don't. My story is an unpleasant incident of a horrible decade. I'm not the only one, you know. Good-night, my dear.'

Ladislav jumped up.

'It's my job to get you out of this!' he exclaimed.

'Don't talk romantic drivel!' retorted Barbara unkindly. 'It's charming, and I appreciate it immensely, but it's not true. Your orders said nothing about females in distress. Besides, I'm not in distress. That's all over. If it wasn't I'd never have told you anything about it. But it was better for you to know me for what I am.'

The door closed behind her slim, straight back.

Left alone, Ladislav pressed his forehead against the window-pane, seeking reality in its cool and hard transparency, and tried to think. But he could not think. His thinking process was submerged beneath a red spate of most primitive anger. His cousin had proved himself an outlaw, not only from his country, but from humanity and decency. For a mad stallion shooting was the only medicine. It seemed too honest a remedy for the madness of Michael Konski. If he were mad . . . and even in his fury of anger and disgust, Ladislav could not bring himself to believe

that Michael was sane: that he was a deliberate and conscious sadist. To face facts is the whole duty of man. But there are facts too utterly horrible to face. So thought Ladislav, his English upbringing still fighting gallantly its losing battle against his Slav blood, warmed and quickened by circumstances and environment.

Instinct bade him take Barbara and go — anywhere. Another instinct stronger than prudence and safety bade him wait for Michael's return. God! The fellow had the same blood in his veins! Ladislav felt that he could never rest easily again, till the shedding of that blood had done something to wash away the dishonour Michael had done, as much to Konski as to Barbara. Yet, to stay and kill Michael meant death or worse for him and the girl at the hands of Michael's ruffians. To stay, therefore, was stark lunacy. But his orders were to stay — and he doubted if he could persuade Barbara to go. It seemed she didn't want to go. To his masculine eye it was as if she knew that, back in the world of normality and civilisation, the horror of what had befallen her would rise up immense and unbearable to haunt her life and doom any hope of happiness.

'In short,' he muttered whimsically, 'we must stay, and try to put a good face on what will inevitably be a sticky end!'

Ladislav turned from the window, threw up his head, listened intently. In her room Barbara was

playing her violin. For all its depth of resignation and sadness, the melody of a Chopin nocturne came pure and sweet and beautiful. To Ladislav it was an epilogue to her story. The spirit cannot be defiled. Matter is insignificant. Courage and truth are indestructible. Platitudes, perhaps, as dull but as essential to life as bread. . . .

Then he heard something else, and flung open the window. From the darkness where the north lay came a sound as of distant thunder. But the sky was clear and the stars shone brilliantly. The distant rumble swung from end to end of the invisible horizon.

'Guns!' whispered Ladislav, leaning out of the window, and peering futilely. 'What the devil! Guns!'

It was unmistakeable. He had heard it too often in France: not the solid, deliberate thudding of heavy artillery, but the continuous rumble of a barrage from field-guns. He twisted his lips into a bitter smile. 'The orchestra begins,' he muttered.

And with the grotesque inconsequence of thought he remembered the thrill of the drums, when for the first time he had heard the Siegfried Funeral March at the Queen's Hall.

CHAPTER XII

THE PALE HORSE

LADISLAS went to sleep that night with difficulty and slept badly, his ears assailed by the mutter of the distant guns mingled with the strains of Barbara's violin, his mind one mass of conflicting plans and emotions. He woke at dawn to see the grey light filtering between his curtains. Springing out of bed, he went to the window and looked out. But there was nothing to see. The countryside looked desolate, cold, cheerless. The guns had ceased. The violin was mute. He cursed his imagination and his sensitiveness, got back into bed, and slept soundly.

He was reawakened about ten o'clock. But this time there was no sleek, silk-bloused servant with fragrant tea. A hand shook him roughly by the shoulder, and he peered up into the unprepossessing countenance of Lieutenant Sturm. The naval officer looked extremely ill at ease, and spoke in rapid staccato French.

'I must beg you to rise and dress quickly,' he said. 'There are matters of which we must talk.'

Ladislás rubbed his eyes and yawned twice.

'Damn! Why?' he asked curtly.

'There are certain awkward developments in the general situation ——' began Sturm speciously.

Ladislav got out of bed slowly and into a dressing-gown more slowly still.

'I must have some hot water to shave in,' he complained. 'And — look here, Sturm, forgive a personal question, but why on earth do you always wear full-dress naval uniform in this God-forsaken hole?'

Sturm drew himself erect and very stiff, and his heels clicked.

'I will tell you,' he said simply. 'When I fled from Kronstadt I ordered my servant to pack my uniform cases. There were five. I had to leave in considerable haste. I took the first one to hand. It happened to be the full-dress ceremonial one. I left Kronstadt wearing mufti. Major Konski has been unable to provide me with the service uniform of my rank, but, as his aide-de-camp, for me to wear mufti is unthinkable.'

He bowed jerkily.

'I beg your pardon for my curiosity,' said Ladislav gravely.

'Enchanté,' said Sturm, and relapsed into silence.

He maintained his position and his eye as of an inspecting general upon Ladislav, while the latter shaved, washed, dressed, and lit a cigarette. Then, as if the flinging of the match into the grate had galvanised him into life, he moved to the door and flung

it open. 'Will you be so good as to follow me?' he said, and led the way to Michael's sanctum.

They found Barbara there. She was lying full-length on the floor, her chin propped on her hands, contemplating with whole-hearted amusement the mimic warfare of two Siamese kittens. She did not look up when Sturm opened the door.

'They're rather darlings, aren't they, Ladislas?' she said gaily. 'I call one Pure Devilry and the other Original Sin — P. and O. for short! They belong to Michael really, but they tolerate me quite a bit.'

'Your pardon, madame,' interrupted Sturm.

'I'm not going,' cried Barbara, 'if that's what you mean. Don't bother about me! Honestly I'm much more interested in P. and O. than you and your stuffy affairs! I'm sorry if that's rude.'

'It is serious, madame,' Sturm persisted.

~~'Now what could be more serious than china-blue eyes in chocolate masks? Look at them!'~~ said Barbara, scrambling to her feet with a kitten in each hand.

Sturm contemplated the small squalling things stonily through his eyeglass.

'They are not to me serious cats, madame,' he said at last. 'They are uncivilised, without culture.'

Good Lord! thought Ladislas, he's unbending; he's trying to be funny. He caught Barbara's eye, and

~~had to turn away hurriedly to conceal an inappropriate display of emotion.~~

'What's the trouble?' he demanded.

Sturm continued to gaze uneasily at Barbara. ~~Ladislav, following his example, could not believe~~ that the girl who had sprawled on the mauve carpet, apparently as gay and lithe and young as the kittens whom she was driving to frenzy with a ball of wool, had stood on that same carpet the night before and sickened him with a tale of cruelty and rape. The futility of life, in which an obviously sensitive person must equally obviously get used to anything, however horrible, once it has become accomplished fact, loomed monstrous in his mind, stifling all initiative, ~~making a mock of vision and of dreams.~~

'Come along, what is it?' he said, pulling himself together and addressing himself sharply to Sturm.

~~Pure Devilry and Original Sin~~ squealed lustily in unison, abandoned the mass of incredibly tangled wool, and joined themselves into a single circular ball of pale fawn-coloured fur, revolving slowly to an accompaniment of deliciously miniature blood-curdling growls and convulsive jabbings of four hind-feet. Barbara rose to her knees and shook back her hair.

'I'm all attention,' she protested, though her eyes wavered back to the Siamese.

Sturm coughed twice. It was almost possible to see, ~~in the concentratedly baleful glare of his eye-~~

glass, the little movements of his right hand against his thigh, the acute agony caused to his meticulously tidy mind by the disturbing antics of the kittens in his commanding officer's private room at what was, in fact, a council of war.

'I am uneasy in my mind,' he said at last. 'Did you hear the artillery last night?'

Barbara looked at Ladislav with widening eyes. He nodded.

'What of it?' he asked.

'It involves something beyond the scope of my orders,' said Sturm primly. 'It can mean only one thing. The Bolsheviks have begun an advance in the North. They must have attacked some Polish advanced troops towards Minsk. I do not think Michael Ivanovich expected this development as yet. He and his men may have ridden into a trap.'

Ladislav crossed to the big maps on the wall.

'You can do nothing but wait and see,' he said decisively, though he smiled at the dog-eared phrasing. 'He may be anywhere within forty miles. If you ride out with the other squadron, you leave this place open to any roving Cossack patrol, and you may be cut off without even finding Major Kon-ski. Of course, you can retreat and abandon the castle ——'

'Such a movement has never been contemplated,' said Sturm stiffly.

'I beg your pardon. But if you stay, and the Bol-

sheviks advance in force, there can only be one end to any attempt at resistance. You realise that?’

The lieutenant nodded. Ladislas took a sudden liking to his automatic courage. It had something of Sparta and Thermopylæ in its trained lack of nervous imagination. Then he looked at Barbara, who was separating Pure Devilry from Original Sin with considerable difficulty and supreme concentration.

‘No use looking at me, Ladislas,’ she said, without looking up. ‘You can’t offer to take me away for your own self-respect’s sake. And I won’t help you by asking you. J’y suis, j’y reste.’

‘I regret, madame,’ said Sturm, ‘that I have no orders to ask you or help you to leave the castle.’

‘You mean,’ flared Ladislas, ‘that you have orders to see that Madame Konski remains?’

Sturm shrugged his square shoulders. Ladislas clenched his fists. Barbara laughed.

‘My dear Ladislas, please don’t be foolish! The question does not arise. I’ve told you, I’m staying definitely.’

‘I should recommend you to see that your scoundrels are at their posts and keeping their eyes open!’ snapped Ladislas.

‘I should be glad of your company on my round of inspection,’ replied the lieutenant smoothly.

Ladislas glared at him for a moment. Then, Barbara close behind him, he followed Sturm down into the hall. On the staircase a thought struck him.

At least he could begin to fulfil his mission. He could send news of the expected offensive. The servants were all gathered in the hall, 'Bloody Bill' amongst them. They had changed their silk blouses for dirty Russian uniforms, and were filling bandoliers and sharpening bayonets. Ladislas beckoned to Bill.

'Car's fixed,' said the latter laconically.

'Get a gun and stay close to me,' said Ladislas. 'Where's that man who brought me my breakfast yesterday?'

Bill professed ignorance. Neither as Pole nor as American had he found anything in common with Michael's servants. A mechanic first, last, and all the time, his contempt for moujiks was superbly inexpressible. Ladislas repeated his question to Sturm, who raised one eyebrow.

'The Polish spy?' he said. 'Michael Ivanovich has only one way with spies, Captain Sale.'

Again Ladislas felt Barbara's restraining hand on his arm. Never had he needed that firm grip more sorely. The cold ruthlessness of Sturm's words, the deliberate murder they implied, the result that he was completely isolated from support or aid, all combined to make him see red, to urge him to any fantastic or desperate course, damning the inevitable consequences. That last pitiful link snapped, he and Barbara were like rats in a trap. No way out, and the strap suspended over a brimming bucket. . . .

Why not a desperate bolt for the car? It only meant dying a little more quickly. . . .

Barbara's arm slid through his, impelling him to cross the hall and follow Sturm into the courtyard. The day was very still. The sun blazed down out of a cloudless sky. Beyond the wall the black pines rose, spears of the wardens of an inexorable doom. Halfway across the courtyard Sturm stopped, frozen in his stiff stride by the sound of a shot. It came from perhaps a mile away. It was followed in a moment by two more.

'That's from the bridge on the Wilno road,' said Barbara.

Sturm shouted an order, and a man went running to the stables for a horse. Sturm walked after him, and swung himself into the saddle, looking grim and efficient for all his absurd panoply of gold lace and cocked hat.

'Stay here with madame, Captain Sale,' he said, as Ladislas looked about him irresolutely.

'That be damned!' said Ladislas. 'Get me a mount!'

As he spoke there was another shot, much nearer at hand. They could hear distinctly the uneven thudding of hoofs of a horse hard pressed, the sobbing grunts of a beast driven to its limit. They dashed towards the gap in the wall, in time to hear the startled challenge of the sentry, and see a pale horse swerve at the levelled rifle, stumble, fail to re-

cover, and come down, flinging Hippolyte Marcouire almost at Barbara's feet.

Sturm dismounted, and with unhasty precision put a bullet through the fallen horse's head. It had broken a leg, and lay covered with dust and foam. Marcouire, bareheaded, white to the lips, bathed in sweat, lay still. His left wrist had been broken by a bullet, and an ominous brown patch was spreading over the blue uniform that had been so smart two days before. Barbara knelt down and lifted his head, while Ladislav poured brandy between his clenched teeth. Above them Sturm looked on dispassionately; then, seeing accurately enough that Marcouire was dying, he cantered off briskly to visit his outposts.

Marcouire twitched and groaned. A little colour crept into his ashen cheeks. One hand went up to push back a lock of hair that was glued to his forehead. But the effort was too much for him. The hand dropped limply. Barbara wiped his face with her silk handkerchief.

'Done for, I'm afraid,' whispered Ladislav.

Marcouire's eyes opened. He saw Ladislav, and managed to twist his lips into a smile.

'Comme je suis heureux ——' he began feebly.

'Can you tell us what happened?' asked Barbara.

'Forgive me, madame, for causing you such trouble,' Marcouire went on. 'Ah, the poor horse! He carried me so gallantly and so far ——'

‘Don’t tire yourself,’ said Ladislas soothingly, and gave him more brandy.

The Frenchman smiled.

‘I am, as you say, all right,’ he whispered. ‘But you and madame — you must escape à toute vitesse. That man is the devil himself!’

With the help of two of the servants who had appeared in the courtyard, Marcouire was carried into the great hall and laid gently in old Stanislas’s chair, his feet supported by a stool. Barbara set cushions at his back and behind his head, and soothed his forehead with a slim cool hand.

‘Tell us, if you can, without tiring yourself,’ said Ladislas.

‘I shall rest soon enough,’ replied the Frenchman. ‘I must speak now ——’

This was his story, gasped through swollen lips, in jerky, disconnected sentences interrupted with groans of pain for which he continually apologised, mortified by his inability to control every symptom of his agony:

The whole of the previous day he had ridden uneventfully with Michael Konski at the head of his troopers. They had moved slowly, covering in all perhaps thirty miles, with frequent halts. Marcouire had been uneasy. He was eager to get on to Wilno, where he was already long overdue, but Michael had insisted that for him to go on alone was madness, while the squadron had to travel slowly, to

rest their horses against any emergency. They bivouacked about eight in the evening, intending to move again at dawn. After a rough-and-ready meal Marcouire, unable to repress his personal distaste for Michael's company, took his blankets and retired to the shelter of a convenient tree. There he rolled himself up, finished a cigarette gazing at the stars, and went to sleep. About an hour later he woke. The flesh-wound in his arm, which he had received when Ladislas saved him from the ambush, was aching consumedly. He cursed and raised himself on his other elbow. The camp was still. The fire round which he had eaten with Michael and his two officers, Grigorieff and Medvedenko, was only just visible, a mass of smouldering embers. Some distance away the bayonet of a sentry glinted in the starlight. Michael's guards knew better than to sleep at their posts. He lay down again and groped for his cigarette-case. Then he heard low voices immediately behind him. Their owners were hidden from him by the trunk of the tree, but one belonged unmistakably to Michael. The other within a few sentences was revealed as Medvedenko.

Though constitutionally disinclined to eavesdrop, Marcouire was equally disinclined to move. Moreover, he contemplated a sleepless night, in which any interruption was necessarily welcome. Michael was speaking in French. Presumably he was thinking that some of his men might be awake, while he

had overlooked the Frenchman. At any rate, the latter lost any scruples concerning the overhearing of a private conversation very quickly. For here was proof of the very thing at which the Polish intelligence officer had hinted to Ladislav in Warsaw. Michael was playing a double game. It appeared that the Red Commissar at Minsk was a connection of Medvedenko's, and the latter had been in communication with him on Michael's behalf. The Bolsheviks, so Medvedenko reported to his chief, would be glad of his help on certain conditions.

'I make my own conditions,' said Michael haughtily.

'They will not trust you so far,' said Medvedenko. 'It is known that you have a Polish officer in the castle ——'

'My cousin from England!'

'He wears Polish uniform. Besides, you were seen with Savinkov in Warsaw, Michael Ivanovich. They demand proof of your good faith.'

There was a pause. Marcouire imagined Michael scowling through the darkness, tapping his boots with his whip, then suddenly flinging up his head with quick decision.

'No stranger ever leaves the castle alive — did you tell them that?' he said.

'No.'

'Fool! Cousin or no cousin, Captain Sale has seen too much! Do you think his disappearance would suffice as a guarantee?'

'That — and the admission of Red troops to the castle, yes,' said Medvedenko. 'You must remember, Michael Ivanovich, you have not been very tender with the Bolsheviks till now.'

'Tender! With that canaille!'

Again a pause.

'Very well,' continued Michael. 'You can let them know in Minsk that the "Polish officer" will disappear — but not to Warsaw. I will admit Red troops to the castle if they come in sufficient strength. I want no rabble of half-trained Cossacks to make trouble for me. I must have disciplined infantry.'

Medvedenko's spurs clicked as he saluted. He strode away, and after a moment or two Michael passed in front of Marcouire, where he lay motionless in his blankets. In the dim light his figure loomed gigantic and menacing. Marcouire felt for his pistol. But Michael moved slowly away, unsuspecting of the discovery of his treachery, deep in thought with his head bent on his chest.

Marcouire too thought deeply. Apart from the fact that he owed Ladislav a warning in return for saving his own life, apart from this naked treason to Poland, there was an even more urgent spur to action. No stranger, Michael had said, leaves the castle alive. That applied as well to Hippolyte Marcouire as to Ladislav Sale. The retailing of the truth about Michael Konski to the French Mission in

Wilno might not suit the book of the leader of the White Skulls. In fine, was he not himself in danger of imminent and sudden death? Marcouire, with Gallic quickness and sense of reality, answered himself in the emphatic affirmative. What then? Obviously flight. But flight in the dark in unknown country was out of the question. Besides, the horses were under double guards, as he knew very well. He put his pistol handy under the haversack which served him for a pillow, and fell into an uneasy doze. But his arm pained him no longer. He had other things to occupy his mind. . . .

With the rousing of the squadron at dawn his chance came, to be seized with characteristic promptitude. After a hasty meal, Michael paraded his men. Marcouire, as supernumerary to the establishment, could ignore the fluent and unmistakeable orders to saddle up and fall in. He made a long business of tightening girths, and settling bit and bridle, while the squadron was formed into line. Then as Michael called up his officers and began to give them marching orders for the day, Marcouire got quietly into his saddle and edged away almost imperceptibly between the trees. Suddenly Michael, looking up from his map, saw the pale horse in movement, and shouted something. What it was Marcouire did not know. He jammed in his spurs, crouched low in his saddle, and rode for dear life down the road they had come the day before.

Luckily he was riding one of Michael's own horses. Mounted pursuit was, therefore, impracticable. But some of the troopers dismounted and opened fire with their rifles. Marcouire was lucky. He got off with nothing worse than a broken wrist, while his beast was grazed along the off hindquarters. But as far as he could tell, nothing more was done. Perhaps Michael trusted to Sturm's initiative and discretion. Probably even then he did not imagine that Marcouire had overheard his conversation of the night before.

So Marcouire had ridden through the dawn into the glaring sunlight of that July day, feverish with apprehension, much pained by his damaged wrist, urging his horse to its best speed, yet careful to nurse its strength. He had been so intent upon the problem of Ladislav's escape from the castle that he had forgotten the very existence of pickets at the bridges. He hardly heard the automatic challenge as he cantered down the road. His realisation of danger only came with the first shot. The bullet went high, and Marcouire, knowing no password, and determined to reach the castle at any cost, forced his charger into a final wild gallop. The two men at the bridge ran from under the thudding hoofs, but fired as the Frenchman passed. One shot struck Marcouire in the back. The other wounded the horse. The gallantry of man and beast alike had alone served to carry them as far as the courtyard....

Marcouire's face was livid and ghastly as he finished his story; his eyelids flickered up and down over eyes glassy and fixed; his breathing rasped more and more, grew faster and faster. With a convulsive movement he jerked himself erect in the chair. His right hand groped towards Ladislas, who caught it in his own.

'Bonne chance, mon ami,' he said.

Barbara put her hand softly on his shoulder. Marcouire turned his head, smiled at her, made a vain attempt to bend his lips to her fingers.

Ladislas felt the grip slacken, and Marcouire dropped back in the chair. It was all over. He was dead.

Across the body Ladislas met Barbara's glance. And in her eyes, at once so sad and so merciless, he seemed to read her final verdict on her husband. She had forgiven much, tolerated more, endured most of all. But with the murder — for it was little less — of this gallant boy, the last vestige of her confessed weakness for Michael had vanished. Before Ladislas the issue lay clear and plain. It was civilisation that was the dream, mediævalism the reality. There were two men of whom one must die. There was no more to it than that. The Pole had conquered the Englishman in him. Blood was thicker than water. And his grandmother, Jadwiga, could be satisfied at last.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLACK HORSE

DEATH,' said Barbara to Ladislav a few hours later, 'is a grotesque thing. I suppose I've got used to it now. One does get used to anything. But even as a kid I remember old Brunton the butler telling me of my father's death. And I laughed quite heartily. It wasn't hysteria either. Just a natural reaction from shock. How horrified the bald old man was, poor dear! And now that poor boy this morning ——'

Ladislav took her hand. The sudden near approach of crisis had served to take away that latent antagonism of the sexes, which had reared its head with Ladislav's appreciation of the beauty of his cousin's wife. For the time being hypothetical lovers faced reality hand in hand purely as intimate friends. Emergency is an unrivalled chaperone, alike for efficiency and discretion. . . .

'To me,' said Ladislav, 'the most grotesque thing is the inconsequence of thought, the absurdities of one thing calling up another. Do you know your Shelley?'

'What on earth ——?'

'Exactly. But this morning in the courtyard, as poor Marcouire came crashing through that gap in

the wall, and Sturm peacocked behind me, I thought of Shelley. I'm not posing. It was the unconscious effect of four lines sticking in my memory:

Next came Destiny, he rode
On a white horse splashed with blood.
He was pale even to the lips
Like death in the Apocalypse.

To see it as an illustration in living flesh was inevitable, I suppose.'

Barbara's mouth hardened.

'For us it certainly seemed to imply a destiny of death,' she murmured.

They were sitting in the hall after lunch, talking aimlessly for lack of anything better to do. Across the sunlit threshold lay the black contorted shadow of Lieutenant Sturm, who, from the moment of the conclusion of the meal, had assumed an attitude of expectant immobility on the top step outside the castle door.

What to do? What the devil to do? That was the question that echoed continually through Ladislás's mind, while he chatted aimlessly with Barbara of Thought and Death, and stared at the shadow that seemed to symbolise the bolting of the trap in which they lay. Was there anything he could do but wait for Michael's return, or, alternatively, the arrival of a Bolshevik advanced guard? And, which made it worst of all, there was no help to be had from anywhere. His Polish agent had been mur-

dered. Hippolyte Marcouire's body lay under a sheet in one of the inner rooms, while somewhere in the woods a fatigue party from the second squadron sweated and cursed and spat sunflower seeds into his half-dug grave. Ulrich Sturm was an automaton, and an enemy at that. And Barbara, whose years and experience in Russia had taught her that fatalism alone will serve among fatalists as a working philosophy, drank more black coffee than could be good for her, and played with her Siamese kittens.

Could his impatient spirit have taken wing along that dusty road down which Marcouire had galloped so desperately in the morning, Ladislav might have spared himself his self-questioning, and the anxiety caused inevitably by inaction at a time of crisis. For about the time when the Frenchman was gasping out his last words, one of Michael's scouts brought him information which left no doubt that the Bolshevik advance had begun in deadly earnest. The scout had, in fact, only just preceded the remnants of a Polish brigade which had formed part of the containing force on the northern front, and which had crumbled before the thrust now being directed from Minsk and beyond. Michael, his men compact and well in hand behind him, patted Mephistopheles's black glossy neck, and stared frowningly at the blood-stained weary infantry who came plodding past him southward in scattered groups of five or six. A dull anger against them and

all incompetent Poles rankled in his heart. This sudden débâcle was more than he had bargained for. To tell truth, he was in a tight corner. That did not worry Michael, who had lived in tight corners for three years. But he began to fear that he might have played Machiavelli once too often. ~~Of course, it depended on how things turned out. He had done his~~ best to cope with the realisation that any hope of effective Polish recognition was hopeless; that the Poles were in danger of military disaster; that an outlaw must make terms with the rising sun; and that, therefore, an understanding with the Bolsheviks was imperative. While he sat his horse by the roadside, and the retreating Poles filed past, his lieutenant Medvedenko was bargaining with a Red Commissar; making the agreement which should save the master of the Konski castle from the usual fate of White partisan leaders. Yet that very Commissar — a Jew, of course, like most of the unwashed dogs, now called Pavel Uritzky, born Jacob Birnbaum — had distrusted Michael's good faith. What of his own? Could one trust a Red Commissar, and a Jew, to keep his word, once he had his own troops in the Konski castle? Michael chewed the thumb of one of his riding-gloves. Good faith! Promises between an outlaw and a Jew! The very thought would make a cat, let alone the gods, split with laughter. Besides, why had that young fool of a Frenchman chosen to cut and run? Not that he

~~mattered. At large he was harmless. Back in the castle he would, at best, be shot by a zealous sentry; at worst, trapped with Ladislas Sale. . . .~~

Michael's thoughts were broken into by a youthful Polish officer who came up to him, saluted, and gave his name — Captain Casimir Rafalski.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said. 'But are you our brigade cavalry reserve?'

Michael laughed.

'Do I look like it, young man?' he replied offensively. 'Who the deuce are you?'

Under his dust-stains and tan the boy flushed angrily.

'I've about half a company of the rear guard of the Seventh Brigade with me, sir,' he insisted. 'I'm short of food, water, and ammunition, and frankly I don't even know quite where we are. I thought perhaps you ——?'

'You suggest, in fact, that I should drynurse you, Captain Rafalski?'

The Pole turned on his heel and went back to his men, who had dropped in their tracks all over the road. Michael followed him with a curious look in his eyes. Then his jaw tightened, and he smacked a hand down on his thigh, causing Mephistopheles to lay back his ears and stamp viciously. He called up Grigorieff, his second-in-command, and spoke to him earnestly in a low voice.

'Listen,' said Michael. 'Send a reliable man off

to Medvedenko. He must go unarmed, get captured, and see both Medvedenko and the Commissar Uritzky. I've changed my mind, Grigorieff. I'll have no Red troops in the castle. Instead, I'll prove my good faith by presenting the Commissar with a selected half-company of Polish prisoners.'

He jerked a thumb at the Polish officer, who was striving to get his leg-weary men into some formation.

'Send off your man, and then make yourself pleasant to that young gentleman,' went on Michael quickly. 'I don't want you to have to fight. Explain that I was pulling his leg. Offer to cover them while they retire as far as the castle. Give them food, but not ammunition. And let your mounted men offer to carry their rifles. You understand? Medvedenko will, no doubt, prevent the pursuit being too hot. But if the Reds attack you, you must use your own discretion. I expect you — and our friends there — as early as possible.'

Grigorieff, a blond-bearded Ukrainian giant, nodded, and laughed evilly.

'Bien,' said Michael.

He waved his hand, swung the black horse round, and rode back towards his castle, his cousin, and his wife.

But, of course, that cousin was as ignorant that Michael, alone on his black horse, was returning, as Michael was ignorant that the Commissar Uritzky

had decided, in the first flush of the success of the Red offensive, that parleying with White partisan leaders was unnecessary after all. He had proved it to his own satisfaction by arresting Medvedenko, on that officer's arrival, and condemning him to be shot as a counter-revolutionary within six hours. The messenger sent after Medvedenko by Grigorieff gave himself up to a young Cossack, who unfortunately had never yet shed blood. He promptly took the chance to repair the omission, without personal risk. Uritzky also was only too eager to press the pursuit, which Michael imagined was being reduced by Medvedenko to sham-fight proportions. Hence it came about that Grigorieff's squadron had hardly collected the Poles' rifles, fed them, given them guides, and seen them march off towards the Konski castle in much better spirits, before it found itself heavily engaged with the Bolshevik advance. Grigorieff, who to do him justice was a brave man and a good soldier, sent an aide after Michael to let him know, and threw himself joyfully into the fighting of a very pretty rear-guard action, in which his men proved themselves as infinitely superior to the enemy in quality as they were inferior in numbers.

Towards Ladislav, then, as he sat in the hall with Barbara, and prayed for opportunity for action, three different units, each pregnant with action, were approaching at varying speeds: first Michael, spurring Mephistopheles, and singing as he spurred,

for he felt that he had once more been too clever for outrageous fortune; secondly, the weary half-company of disarmed Polish infantry, who thanked God for the vagaries of White partisans, while they simultaneously deplored all Russian manners; and thirdly, Grigorieff and his squadron in slow retirement, fighting for every yard.

It was the distant mutter of Grigorieff's rifle-fire that took Ladislás out again into the sunshine. Ulrich Sturm seemed unmoved, except that he had taken the glass from his eye and was polishing it with his handkerchief. As he explained patiently to Ladislás, on first hearing the firing he had sent out men to get in touch with Michael — supposing that it was the first squadron of the White Skulls who were engaged. That done, he proposed quietly to wait upon events or orders or both.

Ladislás turned away from him helplessly. Back in the cool of the hall Barbara was making more coffee in a little copper Turkish pot over a spirit-lamp. The kittens were competing against each other for the larger share of a saucerful of milk on the hearth. In the background 'Bloody Bill' was oiling the bolt of his rifle. From the door under the antlers one of the three Borzois watched the scene with a superb air of aloofness and aristocratic disdain. Except for Bill's rifle it was a very peaceful, almost a domestic, scene. And in this domesticity and quiescence it flashed across Ladislás's mind that

his chance lay — an outside chance of escape. Bill had said the car was again in order. Sturm was alone, for the servants had joined the main body of the garrison at the block-house. Barbara had very sensibly got into her breeches and riding-coat, and, if she still objected to leaving the castle, she must be taken. It was unquestionably a chance for both of them, a chance which would vanish for good with Michael's return. And it would put an end to this damnable and intolerable waiting and expecting. . . .

There was no time to be lost. Sturm might move or some of the garrison put in an appearance. Ladislav called Bill, who shambled across the hall, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lower lip.

'Get the car round,' said Ladislav.

The chauffeur passed Sturm and went down the steps. Sturm refixed his monocle.

'One moment,' he began. 'Captain Sale, I regret ——'

He stopped short at that, for he was suddenly aware that Ladislav's revolver was pointing straight at his heart.

'Take his sword and pistol, Barbara, please. Get a move on, Bill, damn you!'

Bill grinned and vanished round the corner of the castle. Barbara, wide-eyed with astonishment, transferred Sturm's pistol to her own pocket, and threw his absurd dress-sword onto the hall table.

'I mean you no harm, Sturm,' said Ladislav.

‘But I am leaving the castle and you must come with me or I fear your sentries won’t let me pass. You follow?’

The lieutenant stared woodenly, and made no reply.

‘Anything you want to take, Barbara?’ continued Ladislas. ‘If you could find a little food and a bottle or two it might be a good thing ——’

‘I think I told you I am staying here,’ said Barbara calmly.

‘Well,’ retorted Ladislas cheerfully, ‘I tell you that you’re leaving with me.’

‘This place has been too much for you, my dear Ladislas. Or do you admire your cousin to the point of imitation?’

Ladislas smiled.

‘There are moments,’ he observed, as if to the world at large, ‘when even the best of women would be the better for the application of the old-fashioned slipper. Go and snaffle those provisions, my dear, and don’t be an ass!’

For a moment Barbara hesitated, looking dangerous.

‘You will be well advised to stay, madame,’ put in Sturm.

‘Thank you,’ said Ladislas.

And, as he imagined, Barbara’s natural contrariness combined with her sense of humour to come to their rescue. She hurried into the castle and re-

turned with several tins, four bottles of wine, a loaf of bread, and a box of Michael's cigarettes, just as the car purred into the courtyard. She piled the stuff into the car and slipped back for Pure Devilry and Original Sin. Sturm was placed beside Bill. Behind him sat Ladislas, with his revolver levelled at the back of his neck. Next to him was Barbara, the kittens curled up together in her lap.

'Any nonsense, and I'll shoot you quite cheerfully,' said Ladislas to Sturm. 'All right, Bill, go ahead.'

The Cadillac with its odd cargo jerked forward, crossed the courtyard, and proceeded into the great avenue at a steadily increasing speed.

'Where are we going?' asked Barbara, twisting round for a last look at the castle.

'Westwards,' answered Ladislas. 'Damn!'

A heavy wagon slewed across the road barred the entrance to the avenue from the road beyond. On the far side of it three Caucasians and the wagoner squatted on the grass, their rifles laid aside, eating black bread and sausage.

'No tricks, Sturm, remember,' said Ladislas in a low voice, as the car perforce slowed down. 'Have that wagon shifted quickly, and then hold tight! Bill, you drive like hell!'

The car stopped, Sturm shouted to the Caucasians, who scrambled to their feet and began to shift the wagon out of the way. As the car began to move

forward again, Sturm, with a yell at his sentries and a duck of his head, grabbed at the steering-wheel. In a second there was wild confusion. The Cadillac rammed the cart. Ladislav's arm was jerked up, and his pistol-shot went into the upper branches of the nearest tree. Bill, grunting incredible American oaths, grappled with Sturm. Ladislav had a kaleidoscopic vision of Barbara drawing her revolver, of Sturm's eyeglass still fixed in his face, which was upside down, of bayonets catching the light, of the sentries' filthy faces and curiously white teeth. Two or three shots rang out. Bill flung Sturm into the road, where he lay still. Barbara coolly shot one of the Caucasians through the chest. The other two dropped their rifles and lifted their hands when they saw Sturm's collapse. The wagoner had fled.

'Any damage?' demanded Ladislav.

Bill, who had been trying to back the car clear of the wagon and failed, only grunted, and getting out began to heave and tug at the front axle. Ladislav joined him. Barbara kept the two sentries covered. Four or five minutes of straining, sweating, and blaspheming passed in a vain endeavour to get the jammed wheels free.

'I can hear horses,' said Barbara suddenly.

'They must have heard those infernal shots!' gasped Ladislav. 'Quick, Bill, heave! It's coming!'

The car shifted. Barbara slipped into the tonneau while Ladislav sprang in beside Bill.

It was too late. They turned into the main road to find themselves facing a double line of riflemen, their weapons levelled. Behind the rifles towered Michael Konski on his black horse. He was smiling. The car stopped.

‘You are wise,’ said Michael. ‘My return seems to have been well timed. I thought I heard shots just as I reached the block-house. I feared you might be in some trouble, so I brought up reinforcements as quickly as I could.’

His eyes passed from Bill, sullen and glowering, over Ladislas, white and angry, to Barbara, who returned smile for smile, contempt for triumph. Finally, they rested on the kittens and the provisions, and the smile became a grin.

‘Dear me! Have I interrupted a picnic party? Where is the good Sturm?’ Michael dismounted and walked up to the car.

‘I warned you, cousin,’ said he, dropping his hateful amiability; ‘but it seems you despise warnings as much as you loathe me. I relied upon my wife’s virtue, which once I know she prized highly, to safeguard you from attempting to make me a cuckold. I now find that after all I overestimated her loyalty to an idea. Therefore for trying to steal my wife I can partly blame myself. But you do not stop there, Captain Sale. You must, it seems, rob me of my pets and steal from my wine-cellar! There is only one penalty for a thief in these parts.’

Ladislav leaped from the car and faced his cousin.

'I suppose you still consider yourself a gentleman!' he said. And he struck Michael Konski across the face with his open hand.

Michael's hand went to his dagger-hilt. Then he bowed.

'You are too prone to simplicity, cousin,' he said quietly. 'However, in this case I shall be glad to meet your wishes by shooting you in the forest-clearing at moonrise this evening. Till then the castle remains at your disposal. Perhaps your chauffeur will drive you back?'

He turned to Barbara, who had involuntarily risen from her seat in the car.

'You will excuse me, madame, but for the moment I am rather gravely occupied with military affairs.'

As the car moved slowly back towards the castle, Ladislav saw that Sturm lay where he had fallen. On an impulse he got out and raised the lieutenant's head. He was dead. Bill had broken neck and eyeglass simultaneously. Marcouire, Sturm — who would be the next to die?

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUEL

AT this point, while Michael Konski was laying his final plans for what might be a defence of his castle against, but should not appear to be overt defiance of, the Bolshevik advance, it is necessary, at the possible risk of being tedious, to clarify the general situation. It must be remembered that Ladislas Sale and his adventures formed but the tiniest incident in a drama that was being played on a stage running almost from the Baltic coast to the Carpathian Mountains. Far to the south the main Polish armies, after a triumphant advance as far as Kieff, were retreating in considerable disorder towards Warsaw and central Poland. The Bolshevik Staff was seeking to convert this retreat into a disastrous rout by a stroke against the Polish communications from the northeast. Uritzky's force, in itself a strong mixed brigade, but without artillery, was merely the spear-head of this new offensive thrust. Michael Konski, his castle and his affairs, would have had no interest for the ambitious Commissar but for the fact that the best main road for his advance was the road from Wilno to Slonim, which crossed the Niemen at the bend where the Konski castle lay. The importance of gaining rapid

and easy control of that crossing was obvious. Uritzky, therefore, had opened the ball by negotiating with Michael for the surrender of the castle, while his men were driving the Polish Seventh Brigade westwards towards Grodno, clear of the road. Casimir Rafalski's half-company was all that remained of the rear guard of the Seventh Brigade after that engagement, and the brigade, which had been set a hopeless task in 'observing' a hostile force of about ten times its strength, had dissolved into scattered units which were swept up by the Red cavalry or straggled at last into Grodno.

With the destruction of that force, there was nothing between Uritzky and Slonim except the Koniski castle. To get across the Niemen before Polish reënforcements could arrive was imperative. At the same time the merest glance at the map of the environs of the castle suffices to prove the advantage of getting control of the bridge without having to fight for it. For that loop of the Niemen is eminently defensible. The river is deep, wide, and bounded along much of its length by marsh. The two bridges, both old stone ones but strong, on the Wilno and Grodno roads, had long ago been fortified by Michael Konski, and were the only possible crossings. A capable commander in the castle with a small body of determined men could hold up any force unprovided with artillery for hours, if not for days. It was to avoid such a difficult struggle that

Uritzky had begun by offering to treat with Michael. It was only when he found himself engaged with the White Skulls well north of the river that he felt his chance lay rather in a dash than in a negotiation. And he did not allow either for Grigorieff's skill in a fighting retreat, nor for Michael having kept some of his garrison back in the castle ready to be organised for defence.

The arrival of Grigorieff's messenger, to say nothing of the distant sound of his action, had forced Michael to revise his view of the situation. It was doubtful now if he could hope to come to any satisfactory agreement with Uritzky, who had obviously disregarded Medvedenko's latest olive branch, and whose men Grigorieff was obviously killing to the best of his ability. There remained for him the forlorn hope of defending the river-bend against the Reds, of getting rid of Ladislav, who would be an awkward witness of his double-dealing, and of making his best peace with the Poles should they reënforce him before Uritzky could carry the castle. His conclusion was that it was the devil, but it could not be helped; and that the devil helps those who help themselves. So that as the evening drew in, a rider went flying to Grigorieff to bid him hasten the first squadron's retreat, while the second squadron manned the trenches covering the two bridges, and threw out a thin line of sharpshooters along the bank between them.

Meanwhile Barbara and Ladislas, left to the futility of their own devices, sat in the great hall, smoking cigarettes and kicking their heels in frames of mind that were anything but equable. The car was left in the courtyard, with Bill at the wheel; he sat stiffly too, for one of the Caucasians was in the seat behind him with an automatic pistol in his lap. Barbara, who had been momentarily jolted out of her blasé fatalism by the adventure of attempting escape, was frankly furious at its failure, and the consequent indignity of their enforced return to the castle, hardly even guarded. Naturally Ladislas felt the weight of her displeasure, expressed in no measured words:

‘I said it was damned folly!’ she began. ‘Why couldn’t you have looked after that German brute properly? You might have known he would turn nasty! And why the melodramatic attitude to Michael? D’you think he cares about a blow in the face? He despises us for trapped vermin! He doesn’t bother even to put a sentry over us — only over the car!’

She stamped a heel viciously on the stone hearth.

‘Will it help matters to quarrel with me?’ asked Ladislas gently.

‘I may as well,’ retorted Barbara fiercely. ‘I feel like it. You’ll be shot to-night, and I shall be alone again. Alone — my God! Why couldn’t you leave me alone to begin with?’

But Ladislas was no longer a shy, well-mannered Englishman.

'All that is as may be,' said he; 'I think you may thank God I came. If I do die to-night, at least I've stirred you to life first. You won't be content to rot here any longer. It's something done.'

'Why on earth insult Michael in that puerile way?'

'Talk sense, Barbara! D'you imagine I did it for fun? It was the only thing to do, if I wasn't to have Bill and myself put against a couple of trees as a target for a firing-party that minute! Can't you see?'

Barbara was taken aback by his masterful certainty. She had not yet realised that there was an uncivilised side to Ladislas also.

'No,' she said sullenly.

'By that blow in the face, my dear, I asked for a duel. I got it. At least it gives me an even chance.'

'You're optimistic suddenly,' said Barbara. 'Do you realise that Michael was famous as a duellist even before the war?'

'Then he's had time to get stale. No, seriously, Barbara, there is a chance, however small it may be, of drilling a hole in my dear cousin. He couldn't let a blow in the face pass in front of a crowd of his men. He has a reputation to lose.'

'You think they'll hand you bouquets if you kill their leader?'

Ladislás smiled a little grimly.

'There's a proverb about a live dog and a dead lion,' he said quietly. 'I admit they may simply knock me on the head — but better to-night than this afternoon. Don't you agree?'

Barbara struck the table with a gauntleted hand.

'What's the good of talking about it?' she cried.

Ladislás went to her and put a hand on her shoulder, but she wrenched herself away from him.

'I'm not in the mood for sentimentalities!' she flared.

'I beg your pardon,' said Ladislás stiffly. 'Would you rather I left you alone?'

'Yes — no — I don't know. I'm sorry, Ladislás. I'm afraid my nerves are rather going to pieces. I'm being a beast — it's only because I'm afraid. There you have it — I'm in a funk. It's humiliating, horribly. I thought I was beyond all that.'

She looked away from Ladislás. He could see her lips quivering, and felt an insane mixture of acute pity and violent irritation. He realised that his own nerves also were on edge. He had been under random fire often enough. But it needs a different, steelier type of courage to stand up deliberately to shoot and be shot at. There was sweat on the palms of his hands and an ache at the pit of his stomach. . . .

'It's no good thinking about it,' he muttered.

Barbara jerked up her chin, took out her cigarette-case, slid a cigarette along the table to Ladislav, lighted one herself.

'I won't let you down,' she said, a little breathlessly. 'I'm handling my brakes again all right. Do you play Patience?'

Ladislav stared.

'I do,' he said at last.

'I'll get the cards and we'll play a double-demon,' said Barbara.

She left the hall and came back with a lamp and two packs of old playing-cards. And in that small yellow circle of light they played Patience across the long table under the unseeing painted eyes of the dead masters of the Konski castle, while the summer day darkened into dusk outside, and the distant rifle-fire from across the Niemen drew nearer and nearer, sharper and more menacing. The kittens slept, curled together on a chair. The three Borzois had gone out to find Michael. Within the castle there was no sound but the clicking of the cards upon the table, the occasional crunch of a boot on the stone floor, and Barbara's breathing quickened by the excitement of the games. Ladislav, as he gathered his pack together after winning the third game and leaned back in his chair, saw with gratitude and astonishment that the hands which shuffled his cards were steady again. He smiled at Barbara. In the lamplight her face looked terribly pale, with

heavy shadows under the eyes, but the eyes themselves met his calmly and steadily.

‘Deal,’ she said.

In the meanwhile Michael Konski, who, to do him justice, possessed to the full that admirable quality of being able to concentrate on one thing at a time, had been completely absorbed in his military preparations. He had ridden to both bridges, and seen with his own eyes that his men were at their posts, knew what to expect, what to do, and how to do it. ~~Every White Skull realised, by the time that~~ Michael had gone back to the castle where he proposed to hold his reserve of fifty mounted men under his own hand, that his position was analogous to that of the Spartans at Thermopylæ. It says something for the force of the commander’s personality that his men accepted such a situation as natural, ~~almost as commonplace.~~ And Michael, as he cantered into the courtyard, felt well satisfied with the memory of the hard faces which lined his trenches, and the grim bearded lips that had cheered him as he rode away. As he dismounted he smiled; partly at his recollection, partly at the ludicrous stiffness of Bloody Bill, as it were transfixed at the Cadillac’s wheel. Then, as sight of the chauffeur reminded Michael of his cousin, the smile faded, was replaced by a cruel sneer. He turned to Bill, and told him to run the car up against the wall, leaving the courtyard clear for his fifty horsemen, barked an order at

the Caucasian guard, and strode into the hall. He made a great clatter with spurs and trailing sabre, but the card-players did not even look up. Michael stopped by the head of the table, his sneer deepening as he watched the two ranks of opposing cards, the two pairs of hands that seemed in the circle of lamplight to be disembodied, and the strained faces that hung above them like masks.

‘A superb gesture, my wife and my cousin! I offer you my best congratulations.’

Ladislav winced just perceptibly, but he said nothing. Barbara took no notice; never fluttered an eyelid. Michael laughed boisterously.

‘Moonrise is in about ten minutes, cousin,’ he observed.

Ladislav turned his head.

‘I shall be at your service, Major Konski.’

Michael bowed.

‘Thank you, Captain Sale.’

He laughed again, and passed through the inner door towards the interior of the castle.

As the door closed, Barbara sent the cards flying in all directions.

‘Well done,’ she said. ‘Now listen, Ladislav. I’ve seen Michael shoot before. He’s first-class, but he’s slow. He relies on the fact that the average man in a duel shoots in a hurry, with the idea of getting in first shot at any cost. Nine times out of ten he misses, and then Michael pots him like a sitting

rabbit. Aim slow, and remember the duelling-pistol throws high.'

Across the table their hands met.

'I think I can promise you a show for your money, anyway,' said Ladislas. He stood up and raised her hand to his lips.

'Quite charming!' came Michael's voice from the doorway. He flung up his hand in a great gesture towards the antlers above his head. 'I mean to remove them from my unworthy brow after my own fashion,' he continued.

Ladislas laughed.

'I should suggest that we get to business,' said he.

'By all means, dear cousin.'

Michael crossed to the table and laid upon it a flat black box, which he opened to reveal a pair of duelling-pistols.

'Will you take your choice, Captain Sale?'

Ladislas shrugged and took the nearer pistol. Michael bowed and led the way to the door giving onto the courtyard.

At the top of the steps he encountered Grigorieff, who saluted. The big Ukrainian was covered with dust and sweat, but his teeth gleamed in a smile through his beard.

'I rode in to report, Michael Ivanovich,' he said. 'So far things are satisfactory. We've mauled them badly, and for the moment they are disinclined to

press their advance. I lost fifteen dead and twenty wounded.'

'Are the Poles in?' asked Michael.

'I passed them just before I crossed the bridge. They should be here in half an hour. They will be guided straight here.'

'Good. You are just in time to do me a small service before you return to your men. There is a little affair to be settled between Captain Sale and myself.'

For an instant Grigorieff stared. Then he laughed.

'I understand, Michael Ivanovich. I fear you must lend me a handkerchief. My own is somewhere on the Wilno road.'

Michael took his lieutenant's arm and drew him down the steps.

Behind them Ladislas and Barbara stood side by side looking over the courtyard. ~~It was a weirdly im-~~
~~pressive sight.~~ The fifty horsemen were drawn up in two widely extended lines facing each other with perhaps twenty yards between them. They sat their horses in perfect silence, and the only light came from four flaring torches held aloft by the men at the extreme ends of the ranks. Beyond was the dark mass of the old wall; and beyond the wall the darker mass of the trees loomed against a sky already faintly green from the rising of the moon. Now and then a horse stamped, a bit jangled. Overhead a bat swooped and pitched drunkenly. The distant

fring had died away. The scene was set, the audience ready. It merely remained for the actors to take their places and for the moon, which here substituted for a curtain, to rise above the trees.

Slowly the sky brightened, throwing up the impertinent spluttering of the inadequate torches. The serrated tree-tops stood out gradually in relief against a background of green and silver. And, as Michael turned back from Grigorieff and beckoned to his cousin, Ladislav saw the edge of the moon float almost imperceptibly into being above the horizon of the pines. He felt Barbara's hand rest for an instant upon his sleeve. Then he walked down the steps, and almost dispassionately watched Grigorieff load the pistols.

When he looked up, Michael was in the centre of the courtyard, a huge figure in the moonlight, instinct with power. He spoke to his riders rapidly in Russian, and ended with an order which brought them out of their saddles like one man. They stood motionless at their horses' heads, while Grigorieff solemnly placed the cousins back to back between their steady ranks, and handed each his pistol.

'You will walk fifteen paces, messieurs,' said he. 'When I drop this handkerchief, you will turn and fire.'

Ladislav, as he began to walk, and automatically to count his paces, was suddenly acutely conscious of the absurdity of this puerile mummery. All his

senses seemed strangely keen, and with the scent of pines and the smell of horses in his nostrils, the pale beauty of moonlit stone before his eyes, the taste of good tobacco still lingering on his palate, he knew that in this moment of supreme and naked truth he was bitterly loath to die. For he was quite certain that he would die. He was at best an indifferent shot. Michael was an expert. In that queer light and with a strange weapon the result was foregone. No doubt Michael was smiling over it as he walked. . . .

Ladislav stopped; glanced over his shoulder at Grigorieff, who stood well back from the line of fire, the handkerchief limp and white between his fingers. It fluttered clear of them to the ground. Ladislav turned, and levelled his weapon.

It seemed a moment of years while his arm fell slowly to the horizontal. Every second he expected the black muzzle that faced him to flame scarlet, and to feel the numbing crash of his enemy's bullet. It did not come. And his eyes, for a moment falling off the target, took in Barbara's white face where she stood at the top of the steps. He seemed to hear her voice 'Aim slow — and remember the duelling-pistol throws high.' He seemed too to see something else: that same white scared face in the gloom of a dark bedroom, whose door was blocked inexorably by Michael Konski's body. . . .

His hand was now steady as a rock; he dropped his

pistol muzzle another fraction and pulled the trigger. Almost simultaneously came the report of Michael's weapon. But for once in his life Michael Konski had rated his opponent too low, and had waited too long. It was in the second in which he was savouring the delicious certainty of sending his bullet crashing through his cousin's brain that Ladislav, following Barbara's instructions too literally, shot him just above the right knee. With an oath Michael went down. His shot thudded uselessly against the wall behind Ladislav. The White Skulls whispered and stirred ominously, till Grigorieff bending over his chief called them to order.

Ladislav walked slowly over to his cousin, smoking pistol in hand. The thing was incredible, till he became conscious of reality in Barbara's hands clutching his, and could see unshed tears shining in her eyes. 'You damned young fool!' said Michael pleasantly, from where he sat supported by Grigorieff's knee. 'Can't you make a job of anything? You couldn't even kill me! Only render me half-useless as a soldier, which probably cooks all our geese! But I must apologise for trying to shoot you. I am assured now that my wife's virtue was safe in your hands. Why, you, my dear Ladislav, haven't the guts to seduce a female guinea-pig!' With which Parthian shot he fainted.

CHAPTER XV

THE WHITE SKULLS

IT was, therefore, a curious group that Casimir Rafalski found in the hall of the castle when he and his half-company of leg-weary Polish infantry reached it about half an hour after the duel. Michael Konski, his leg admirably bandaged, was in old Stanislas's great chair. Barbara, who with typically feminine inconsistency had been making such a good job of the bandaging, was washing her hands in a basin that Bill had brought from the stables. Ladislas sat on the table, swinging his legs, and arguing almost amiably with his cousin the difficulty of shooting by other than daylight. Grigorieff, torn between anxiety for Michael and his natural desire to get back to his men, was fretting up and down, like a jaguar behind bars.

'We can't afford this waste of time,' he protested to Michael in Russian, as Casimir interrupted his conversation with Ladislas by coming in and reporting his arrival.

Michael smacked a hand onto one of the arms of his chair.

'If I can't fight, I can still command,' he said. 'Captain Rafalski, your men will find shelter and straw in the outhouse behind the right wing. I will

have them sent food and drink. I hope they are ready for the devil of a fight to-morrow. Barbara, go to bed. Ladislas, the final settlement between us must wait till after to-morrow. I should be glad if for the moment you would act as my second-in-command here. Grigorieff's place is with the first squadron.'

The Ukrainian saluted and hurried out into the night.

'He'll have all his men this side of the river before dawn,' continued Michael. 'The Reds won't attack before morning. We'd better get some sleep while we can. You'd better get that ruffian of yours to call you early, though. I'll lend you Mephistopheles, if you think you can sit on him safely. I hope you've enough Russian to tackle those fellows of mine in the morning?'

'I'll do my best,' said Ladislas.

'Yes. A habit of yours,' said Michael. 'Good-night. The servants will look after me.'

Ladislas shrugged helplessly, and made his way to his room. How invariably, whenever he felt inclined to like his cousin, to believe that after all he was not a bad man, but an ordinary man with an insane streak, Michael repudiated the possibility of liking or pity, by a gibe or an insult! Well, to some extent it simplified matters. . . .

He undressed slowly, a cigarette between his lips, but he was already in pyjamas and a dressing-gown

when he heard a tap at his door. It hardly surprised him when it opened to admit Barbara. She was wrapped in a silver-grey kimono spattered with scarlet birds, but her hair was still coiled over her ears. She came straight to Ladislas, made him sit on the bed, and sat down beside him.

‘I’m not being Potiphar’s wife,’ she began; ‘you are quite safe with me, Ladislas.’

Ladislas smiled.

‘I’m afraid I am,’ he said.

‘Don’t be an ass! I suppose you can guess why I’m here?’

‘I can’t. But every moment I’ve spent in Poland has convinced me a little more of my incurable stupidity.’

‘I’m going to be serious for five minutes. Ladislas. I came to see you, because I wanted to speak to you alone just once more. You see, we shall be dead before to-morrow night.’

‘It certainly looks like it.’

‘Well, I wanted to say “Thank you.” You’ve been a dear, Ladislas. I hoped it might have been more than thank you. But as it is ——’

She broke off, and silence fell between them.

‘You won’t leave me again — to Michael or to the Reds?’ she went on after a little.

‘No,’ said Ladislas, biting his lips.

‘Thank you. I think I shall sleep to-night for a change. Good-night, my dear.’

With a swift movement she leaned across and kissed his lips.

‘Barbara ——’ he began hoarsely.

She laid a swift hand across his mouth.

‘You’ll want all the rest you can get,’ she said firmly. ‘Good-night.’ And she was gone.

With the click of the door Ladislav rose to his feet and crossed the room. He stood gripping the handle for a few moments, almost decided to follow her. He loved Barbara. Of course he loved her, had loved her from that moment when he had first seen her on her mare. And she loved him. That too was plain. For Ladislav had reached a point beyond sham humility. The mere approach of death is an unrivalled searchlight on the human soul. But this love, which in proverb makes the world go round and in fact turns it into a topsy-turvy compound of heaven and hell, is a strange thing. Love of the flesh is good, though like all common things it wears thin and rots with surfeit. Love of the spirit is rare, and by itself unsatisfying. Love of the mind is born only of eunuchs and the higher education of women. But there is a love, compounded of the flesh, the spirit, and the companionship of high adventure, which demands in its devotees a mixture of romance and common-sense, which in the midst of civilisation would be stigmatised as quixotic folly, and is only tolerated through the medium of Edmond Rostand’s poetry. ‘No,’ said Ladislav to himself,

'it would be easy, it would be pleasant to follow Barbara to her room. Tristan and Iseult were great lovers of the flesh. They were right to die in each other's arms. Barbara and I are only lovers through the fellowship of adventure. And for us the adventure of the bedroom has been spoiled by modern novels and plays: it is only the Bloomsbury adaptation of "hide-and-seek." Besides, we want all the rest we can get!' And with a wry smile he went back to bed.

To him it was as if he had slept not more than an hour or two before he woke again to find Bloody Bill opening his window curtains, and making a great clatter in his basin with a can of boiling water produced by some miraculous effort of his own. Ladislas sprang out of bed, and realised with satisfaction that after all he was not really tired. He felt fit to fight for his life — which was precisely what he was about to do. His conversation with Barbara the night before had cleared his mind and confirmed his decision. He felt, too, a passionate gratitude that he was still alive. The evening before he had been certain that he would die in the duel. To-day it was long odds he would die fighting the Reds. But the oppressive certainty of doom no longer lay upon his spirit. His defeat of his cousin at his own game had given him a confidence which no facts, however hard or unpleasant, could altogether destroy. As he shaved and washed, he

experienced a purely physical well-being that made him simultaneously long for struggle and despise the possibility of death. And then his mood was damped by the recollection of all those paunchy, conditionless bourgeois who daily sing in their baths before proceeding citywards. . . .

Bill, who had been applying violence and a clothesbrush to Ladislás's uniform, interrupted an unedifying thought-sequence.

'Beg your pardon, sir,' he said. 'But the car's still in the yard.'

Ladislás smiled. 'The yard' amused him. He wished Michael had been there to hear.

'She's fit to run for her life any time now,' continued Bill huskily.

'I'm afraid we're bound to see through the fight to-day,' said Ladislás. 'Boots, please. Thanks. Then we'll see.'

'She's ready when you are, sir. You know, sir, the Major's bughouse!' He jerked a thumb upward over his shoulder.

'If we weren't all mad, more or less, we should not be here,' grunted Ladislás, buckling his belt. 'Where is Major Konski?'

'As near the golden gates as he's ever likely to get,' said Bill.

It transpired gradually that Michael had been on the roof of the castle since dawn. He had summoned four of his personal servants to act as bearers,

and by them had been carried to the top of the tower, which formed, as it were, the joint of the main building of the castle and its right wing. There Ladislas found him in a deck-chair, propped up on a multitude of absurd many-coloured silk cushions, with a box of cigarettes and a pair of powerful field-glasses in his lap. In that position he no longer looked powerful, but only bulky. Yet his eyes were as alive, his bearded lips as fiercely sardonic as ever.

‘How’s the leg?’ asked Ladislas.

‘Thank you. You have succeeded in crippling it most adequately. As there is no one here to cut out the damned bullet, I shall probably lose it — if I live long enough. Not that I shall!’

A horrible thought flashed into Ladislas’s mind.

‘But your men when they’re wounded! Grigorieff’s twenty yesterday?’ he stammered.

Michael laughed savagely.

‘I’ve no paternal government to keep me in field-ambulances, my dear Ladislas! Grigorieff was conducting a fighting retreat against superior numbers. Did you expect him to encumber himself with wounded men? You needn’t worry. The Reds will have put them out of their misery long ago.’

Ladislas turned away from him feeling sick and giddy. He looked northward over the low parapet of the tower, but at present there was nothing to be seen but a thick curtain of mist, while to the east the

sun appeared like a semi-transparent red plate hung between earth and sky.

‘I expect we shall be under fire up here,’ went on Michael calmly behind him, ‘but the Bolsheviks are vile shots. In any case, it’s the only place from which I can keep an eye on both bridges, and that’s essential. The mist will clear in an hour. Will you smoke? Our tea and toast are late, but the cook is not at his best on these occasions. I’ve had to correct him before.’

Ladislav lighted one of his own cigarettes, but said nothing. He was not in the mood for light conversation with Michael. But the latter, apparently unmoved by any strained quality in the situation, continued to smoke placidly, and to talk airily, less to Ladislav than for the pleasure and company of the sound of his own voice.

‘I think it will be a beautiful day,’ he continued. ‘I find it difficult, myself, to believe that we shall not see another sunrise. Tell me, monsieur’ — he turned to face Casimir Rafalski, who now appeared on the tower — ‘do you think there is any chance of your general, with the admirable quixotism of your nation, sending out some cavalry to look for his lost rear guard?’

The Polish captain looked pale and sullen. Perhaps he had not forgotten his first meeting with Michael Konski.

‘I have no idea,’ he said curtly.

'I trust you slept well,' said Michael blandly. 'Yes, with another couple of squadrons I'd guarantee to drive that scum of Uritzky's almost back to Minsk!'

'Uritzky is only the spear-head of an army,' retorted Rafalski.

'But what an army! I thought, monsieur, it was axiomatic to patriotic Poles that Russians can march and die, but fight — no.'

'But you are Russian, Major Konski?'

Michael fingered the Saint George's Cross on his breast, while his gaze strayed over the roof of the castle that his Polish ancestors had held so long.

'I am about to fight, and to die,' he said slowly. 'Whether as Pole or Russian strikes me as immaterial.'

The curtain of mist that hung over the countryside was perceptibly thinning, the sun growing more orange, less disc-like. Somewhere below them two or three rifles cracked. Ladislas stared over the parapet, but could still see nothing.

'Breakfast, Ladislas.'

He turned to see two servants laying a table with a samovar, toasted brown bread, and butter. With them was Barbara, in her riding-coat and breeches, bareheaded and smiling.

'Let us eat and drink ——' she said gaily.

Her presence had a curious effect upon the little party. Michael relapsed into silence, though he

watched his wife continually over his glass as he sipped his tea. Casimir Rafalski became very youthfully shy and ceremonious, refusing to sit down, and continually fiddling with the collar of his tunic, which had been badly torn the day before. Ladislas frankly gave himself up to the pure joy of looking at her, letting the mere sight of her beauty drive all apprehension and irritability from his mind and warm his heart, as the tea warmed his body.

Michael may have seen and comprehended to the full. He put down his empty glass.

'Thanks to my fortunate encounter with Captain Rafalski,' he said, 'we have a small infantry reserve in addition to my Caucasian horsemen. I think they had better remain here till we see at which bridge Uritzky proposes to make his main attack.'

The Pole nodded.

'I am at your disposal, sir,' he said. 'I would only say that my men are still tired, and would be better in a fixed position. I would also remind you that their rifles have not yet been returned to them.'

'Quite so,' agreed Michael. 'They will be served out in plenty of time. Grigorieff has his orders.'

'But Grigorieff is at the Wilno bridge,' interrupted Ladislas.

'He has his orders,' repeated Michael coldly.

Rafalski looked at Ladislas, who shrugged his shoulders.

A regular burst of firing drew their attention to

more pressing affairs. Quite suddenly the mist was thinning and shredding out into wisps of disappearing vapour, like the withdrawal of gauze veils in a transformation scene. Michael raised and proceeded to focus his Zeiss glasses. But even to the naked eye the picture spread out before them on the barren rolling plain was terrifyingly obvious. At the eastward bridge already a line of Red skirmishers was engaged in a spasmodic fire-fight with Grigorieff's men. On the Wilno road was a column of cavalry, flanked by massed groups of infantry ready and waiting to move forward. Beyond the westward bridge a Red patrol was cautiously feeling its way through the hovels of the village, but that flank as yet was quiet. The White Skulls still waited to show their hand at the Grodno bridge. But on the road that led north from the village appeared in the distance ominous dark bodies, at present some miles away, but palpably approaching at speed. Michael looked long at them through his glasses, and his face grew stern.

'Our friend Uritzky was too badly bitten yesterday,' he said. 'He means to take no further risks with the White Skulls. He has borrowed guns from the main army: a battery at least.'

Without apology Ladislav snatched the Zeiss. It was true. There were field-guns and cavalry on the Grodno road. They would be in the village in an hour, and then — the deluge! He looked round at Barbara.

'That settles it,' he said.

'I fear that it does,' agreed Michael coolly.

But speculation as to the result of the action now gave way perforce to observation of the action in being. And the tower was a perfect observation post, from which Michael Konski could, as it were, preside with a properly aristocratic detachment over his last battle: a battle in which he himself could not draw sword. Casimir Rafalski went back to his men. On each side of the turret-door from which a staircase led down into the interior of the castle stood two of Michael's personal servants, motionless and impassive. And, while the fight by the river grew hotter, intensifying its noise and fury, which yet seemed so insignificant under the incurious glare of the sun and against the almost limitless horizon, Michael, Ladislav, and Barbara became silent and very still. These three, bound together so inextricably by chains of blood and circumstance, of love and hatred, the present and the past, formed a group almost statuesque: Michael in the centre in his cushioned chair, his expression shadowed by his glasses; Barbara on his left, her right hand clenched on the back of the chair; Ladislav on his right, his eyes shining, his whole body taut as a drawn bow-string.

They watched without word or sign, while at the Wilno bridge Uritzky withdrew his skirmishers, and launched his infantry to the attack. Twice the ex-

tended lines came on, bunched together as they approached the bridge-head, formed a massed column fringed with glittering bayonets, charged. Twice Grigorieff and the White Skulls lay quietly in their trenches till the last moment, shivered the column with steady volleys, and crumbled it into ruin with a perfectly timed counter-attack. The Reds drew off sullenly. The cheers of the White Skulls rose above the dying rifle-fire. Barbara covered her eyes with her hands.

'Sorry,' she said, 'but I can't stand it. I'll be in the hall, Ladislav, if you want me.'

Michael grinned.

'With a couple of machine-guns I could hold this place for a month,' he said.

'You've not got 'em, and you're forgetting the artillery,' retorted Ladislav.

'How true! Nevertheless Grigorieff has done well. There's something to be said for discipline after all, even in these degenerate days. By God! Uritsky's sending in his cavalry — the trick we turned against the Austrians before Brody! Uritsky's a fool, but he plays high!'

Ladislav remembered the exploit of Brussiloff's cavalry, who rode over fully manned trenches in the 1916 offensive. The Reds were trying the same desperate move, for Time was spurring the Commissar ruthlessly to quick decision. But it was a forlorn hope for all its gallantry. Once more Grigo-

rieff held his fire till the horsemen were jammed together on the very bridge itself, inevitably losing order and momentum. Then the rifles spoke, and even Ladislas, who was not new to war, turned away his eyes from the shambles.

‘Capital,’ said Michael quietly.

He swung his glasses onto the other bridge and the Grodno road, lowered them, and turned to Ladislas. His soldier’s eye had penetrated the Red plan in one flash of lightning insight — the insight which in other circumstances might have made him a great captain.

‘They won’t attack the Grodno bridge,’ he said rapidly. ‘Do you see, Ladislas? They’re bringing the guns by that road because of the marsh. They’ll wheel them into line under cover of the village facing east; and enfilade Grigorieff’s trenches from his left flank! If they do, we’re finished! There’s still a chance if you can take the Caucasians, get across into the village, and catch that battery as it unlimbers. Keep among the trees till you’re right up to the bridge! You’ll only have that infantry patrol to brush aside. Never mind the cavalry escort! If you can disable the guns we can hold on for ever. My God, if I could only sit a horse!’

Ladislas nodded.

‘Take Mephistopheles, and ride like hell!’ Michael added. ‘Good luck!’

Ladislas saluted, and turned on his heel.

'You'll want a sword,' said Michael.

'I'm afraid that useful implement is somewhere in Warsaw,' said Ladislas. 'I left it behind.'

'Of course. I had forgotten that you came here as a spy,' said Michael. 'But we won't quarrel. Take mine.'

He turned over in his chair, with a good deal of difficulty unbuckled his silver-hilted sabre, and held it out.

'Take it!' he repeated savagely. 'It's no good to me, thanks to you, damn you!'

Ladislas hesitated. There was a queer look in his cousin's eyes, which reminded him of a trapped animal.

'Look here,' he stammered, 'I think — I feel we ——'

'You have had your orders, Captain Sale.'

Ladislas snatched the sabre, entered the turret-door, and ran down the staircase.

In the hall Barbara was playing with the Siamese kittens. She looked up as Ladislas came in, and went over to meet him.

'Where are you going?' she asked rather breathlessly.

'A little ride towards the village,' said Ladislas.

'I'm coming with you,' said Barbara firmly.

'You're not!'

'I am.'

'I've no time to argue the point, my dear. Au revoir.'

He kissed her hand, turned away feeling rather choky, and hurried out into the courtyard. He took Mephistopheles from a groom and scrambled onto the black horse's back. The fifty Caucasians mounted and formed up behind him. Ladislas explained the situation to a subaltern in rapid if appalling Russian, and the little troop started. But they were hardly clear of the wall and picking their way between the trees towards the Grodno bridge, when Barbara, on her chestnut mare, caught them up and rode to Ladislas at the head of the column.

'I've no time to argue the point, my dear,' she said maliciously.

'Barbara — it's madness! This isn't a picnic, you know!'

'I do know. It's a little ride towards the village, isn't it?'

Ladislas bit his lip.

'We may have to charge,' he said.

Barbara produced her revolver.

'I thought this might be useful,' she said. 'I didn't want to be a bouche inutile.'

'It's stupid to run so gratuitously into danger.'

She struck her boot angrily with her riding-crop.

'Don't talk like a fool, Ladislas! Shall I be any better off in the long run if I lock myself up in the castle with some plain sewing? Don't worry. I

shan't fall off, and I won't get captured. You can't do anything about it, so you may as well make the best of it.'

'Soit.'

'And try not to sulk, my dear.'

There was to be no time for sulking. Already they were on the edge of the trees. A short twenty yards away was the road, and after perhaps thirty yards of road, the bridge. The subaltern dismounted and slipped away to warn the White Skulls in the trenches covering the bridge of the impending movement of the cavalry. In the distance heavy fire seemed to have broken out again opposite Grigorieff's sector. Ladislas looked at the Caucasians behind him. The squat figures and the Oriental faces under their high fur caps gave no sign of any emotion whatsoever. Beside him Barbara, flushed with excitement, might have been waiting for a fox to break covert.

The subaltern reappeared breathing hard.

'We're in the nick of time, sir,' he said. 'We had a man in the village who has just managed to get back by a miracle. He says the battery must be just unlimbering now.'

'Tell 'em to ride like hell and go for the guns. Wounded must look after themselves!' said Ladislas. He added a private sneer at himself to the last phrase, for his squeamishness over Michael's attitude to a similar case.

Then he ripped out Michael's sabre, gave Mephistopheles his head, and led straight for the bridge.

That charge was a chaos of impressionism: the rasp of steel as his men drew behind him; wild cries; the rip of a bullet past his ear; the blur of Barbara's chestnut mare at his left elbow; the rutted muddy road sliding beneath him; the exhilaration of swift movement and wind against his cheeks; the first sight of the battery already unlimbered. These things were fairly clear. But the rest was kaleidoscopic, part nightmare, part inferno. He made a wild effort to get ahead of Barbara and cover her with his body. But Mephistopheles almost came to grief over the first gun, and she was carried past him by the main body of the White Skulls' charge. Three guns were ridden over and the gunners sabred. But the Red cavalry escort of which Michael had spoken so airily came down like a whirlwind.

The Caucasians fought like devils incarnate, but they were outnumbered by four to one, and they had followed their orders to concentrate their attention upon the guns. Ladislav found himself the rallying-point for some fifteen men, whose curved sabres were red from point to hilt, and most of whom were wounded more or less seriously. Among them was Barbara, with blood on her sleeve, and her revolver smoking in her hand. The charge, for all its tactical skill and picturesque bravery, had failed. The milk had been spilled, and there was no time to cry over it.

‘To the bridge!’ yelled Ladislas. ‘Ride for your lives!’

Already the Reds were galloping to cut them off. Ladislas seized Barbara’s bridle with his left hand, sheathed his sabre, sat well down in his saddle, and thrust in his spurs. It was a second charge — but this time for safety, not victory. Reds thundered at their heels. More Reds were across the road by the bridge. But Mephistopheles carried himself like a soldier and a prince, and the chestnut mare gallantly followed his lead. Four of the White Skulls went down. Mephistopheles met one of the Reds’ horses shoulder to shoulder, and with his greater speed and weight sent horse and man sprawling to earth. A second Red came at them from the left, and Barbara shot him through the shoulder. They reached and crossed the bridge, and the infantry in the trenches drove off the Red horsemen with a final volley.

Eight Caucasians, Ladislas, and Barbara regained the shelter of the trees. The other forty-two lay somewhere along the Grodno road, with all their wounds in front.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST CARD

IT was almost the bitterest moment of Michael Konski's life when he handed his sword to Ladislas, compelled to entrust to the English cousin he both disliked and despised the task that should have been Michael's and his alone. Yet he made no sign. He lay propped on his left elbow, his glasses, as it were, glued to his eyes, focussed steadily upon the bridge-head where it joined the Grodno road. He saw the Red battery disappear into the cover of the village, and gnawed his lips with impatience lest Ladislas and his men might be too late. He saw with relief the stirring of horsemen on the edge of the trees. He drew one sharp breath as Ladislas on his black charger came into the circle of vision, galloping for the bridge, a second as he recognised his wife's chestnut mare. He saw, as a whole, from a distance as intolerable as it was detached, that picture of the last charge of the White Skulls which Ladislas had seen only as a blur of wild movement and sudden death. He saw the Red infantry patrol ridden through, the almost harmonious up and down swing and glitter of the Caucasians' sabres as they reached the battery; the furious onslaught of the Red cavalry; the majority of the White Skulls

going down man by man; the death-ride of the survivors for the bridge. He dropped the glasses onto his lap, and lay back with a groan. His leg was hurting most damnably, and he felt spent and exhausted. Almost at the same moment sounded the boom of the dreaded field-guns coming into action against the flank of Grigorieff's trenches.

Overhead the sky was marvellously blue, monotonously cloudless. From where he was Michael could now see only sky and one corner of the roof of the tower on which he lay. In spite of its ever-increasing noise, the battle seemed to have receded into an illimitable distance. It seemed no longer any concern of his. . . . He lighted a cigarette, and idly watched the spiral of smoke rise in the still air.

'A tenuous thread of smoke against blue sky. V'là tout,' he murmured. 'C'est la vie.'

His almost inhuman reverie was rudely broken upon by the sound of angry voices and the clatter of heavy boots upon the stone staircase of the tower. Wearily Michael rose on his elbow. He found himself confronted by Grigorieff and Casimir Rafalsky: the former sweating, grimy, furious; the latter cold, self-contained, but equally angry.

'Why have you left your men?' asked Michael.

The Ukrainian rapped out a great oath and flung out a blood-stained hand.

'I need support, Michael Ivanovich,' he roared. 'I must have more men. God! I and my men have

been through hell this morning! And you hear those accursed guns!’

‘Well?’ interrupted Michael coldly.

‘This dog of a Pole won’t bring his men to my support!’ raved Grigorieff. ‘I sent three messengers. Then I came myself. I must have his men or the bridge must fall!’

‘Quite so. Captain Rafalski, kindly place yourself and your men at Captain Grigorieff’s disposal.’

‘I regret, Major Konski,’ said the Pole, ‘that it is impossible. You are asking me to send my men, already sufficiently hard-driven, to certain death. The defence is cracking. You must surrender.’

‘To the tender mercies of Commissar Uritzky?’ sneered Michael.

‘My men,’ said Rafalski, ‘will be treated as prisoners of war.’

‘So you propose,’ asked Michael pleasantly, ‘to desert us, and your duty?’

‘My duty,’ said Rafalski, ‘is to my men. I owe none to outlaws.’

Grigorieff half-drew his sword. Michael checked him with a gesture.

‘Captain Rafalski, you may return to your men,’ said he.

As he disappeared, Michael seized his glasses for a last look over the battlefield. Rafalski was right. The defence was cracking. With the Poles in mutiny there was no reserve left to the White Skulls. From

their commander's report it was clear that the Wilno bridge might be rushed at any moment, with its defenders decimated and demoralised by the Red artillery fire. A column of attack too was slowly moving through the ruins of the village against the Grodno bridge. Half an hour at most would see the end of the White Skulls unless a miracle should happen.

'Nor do I feel,' said Grigorieff grimly, 'that we are a body likely to appeal to the powers that are popularly supposed to provide miracles in deserving cases.'

'How many horses have you left?' interrupted Michael curtly.

'Perhaps thirty. There was good cover for them, Michael Ivanovich.'

'And you still have the Poles' rifles?'

'Yes.'

The Ukrainian stared at his commander.

'Get back to your men!' snapped Michael. 'Bring the thirty with horses to me here at the castle hell-for-leather! The rest must die where they are.'

Grigorieff saluted, and clattered away.

With a feverish gesture Michael sent his cushions flying in all directions.

'Carry me downstairs,' he called to the servants.

As they lifted him he felt at his sides for his weapons. The big Mauser automatic pistol was in its holster over his right hip. But his left hand

sought in vain for a sword-hilt. He cursed under his breath. He had given it to his cousin in a moment of generous impulse... the fool had probably broken or lost it by now... but he had ridden straight and well in the charge. . . .

‘Take me to my room,’ said Michael.

Supported on his servants’ shoulders he was carried into his room for the last time. His gaze, partly sentimental, partly contemptuous of that very sentimentality, travelled from the curtains to the maps on the wall, from the soft mauve carpet to the jade elephants and silver boxes on the little tables, and rested at last on the old sabre that had been Stanislas Konski’s in 1863.

‘Bring me that sword,’ he said.

A servant brought it. Slowly and awkwardly Michael buckled it to his side.

‘Now to the big chair in the hall.’

Seated in Stanislas’s great chair he drank a glass of wine, which brought the blood racing to his cheeks, whitened and drawn by a night of agonising pain, a morning of exquisite suspense and iron self-control. He stiffened himself against the solid old wood of the chair-back, and gripped the arms tightly.

‘Set this chair at the head of the steps overlooking the courtyard,’ he said at last. ‘With that your service ends. If you care to try and save your skins by taking to the woods and the South, you can go.’

The servants shifted their feet irresolutely.

‘We have our rifles ——’ began one of them hesitatingly.

‘Your decision is quite immaterial to me,’ interrupted Michael curtly. ‘But I prefer not to be kept waiting.’

Without further ado the chair was borne across the hall and placed as he had ordered. The three Borzois came and crouched at his feet. The servants disappeared towards the stables.

Michael drew the Mauser deliberately, laid it in his lap and lighted a cigarette. In front of him the half-company of Polish infantry squatted miserably on the stones of the courtyard, some eating, a few talking in low tones, the majority limp and apathetic. In the distance the rifle-fire cracked monotonously, interspersed with the louder boom of the artillery. Michael’s eyes straying over the Poles changed slowly from contempt to anger. His hands clenched together. The pain in his leg was growing almost more than he could bear. Would Grigorieff never come?

Casimir Rafalski approached, a youthful aggressiveness only serving to emphasise his obvious nervousness. To tell truth the young officer was uncertain as to whether he was in reality behaving like a coward or a man of solid common-sense.

‘I propose to march my men south, clear of the castle,’ he began. ‘I gather you mean to fight it out, Major Konski?’

‘And you do not intend to be involved, even by accident. Your prudence, young man, is quite admirable in one so young! You should go far.’

‘I should be glad of the return of my men’s arms,’ continued Rafalski. ‘They are the property of my Government, for which I am responsible.’

‘I expect Captain Grigorieff at any moment,’ said Michael smoothly. ‘You must do as you please — as I have always done; as I always mean to do.’

‘I regret that my duty forbids me to remain,’ added Rafalski awkwardly.

Michael looked at him coldly. Then he smiled.

‘If I were a poet,’ said he, ‘I would tell you that even a dying lion needs no condolences from jackals!’

Rafalski flushed, and his hand went to his sword-hilt.

‘Your position enables you to insult me with impunity, Major Konski!’

‘It does,’ replied Michael pleasantly. ‘Ah!’

Grigorieff’s figure appeared at the gap in the wall. Michael passed his tongue over his dry lips. Then he whipped up his pistol and pointed it straight at Rafalski’s breast.

‘Form your men up against the wall to my right!’ he snarled. ‘Drop that tin sword, or, by God, I’ll put a bullet through you! Quickly now!’

Rafalski, white to the lips, obeyed. The Poles scrambled unwillingly to their feet and moved to the

wall, leaving the courtyard clear. Michael beckoned to Grigorieff, who rode over to him. His men filed through the gap behind him.

'The bridge will be in the hands of the Reds in ten minutes, Michael Ivanovich,' said Grigorieff in a low voice, stooping from his saddle.

'Then you have just the time necessary to kill me that canaille!' said Michael with a jerk of his pistol towards the Poles. 'Don't waste your ammunition — use the steel!'

Casimir Rafalski gave a cry and reached for the sword at his feet. Michael's automatic rang out and the Pole staggered and fell, shot through the head.

'Kill the cowardly dogs!' repeated Michael savagely.

The death of their leader had turned the Poles from a sullen group of semi-mutinous soldiery to a startled mob of mere excited humanity. A few drew their useless bayonets. Most of them surged together shouting and cursing. They were unarmed, weary, utterly at a loss. They swung to and fro like tall grass under a wind. They were still unaware of the reality of their situation when Grigorieff and his riders were upon them, yelling and slashing. The ghastly business was soon over. One corner of the courtyard looked like a slaughter-house. Grigorieff cut down the last man almost on the steps at Michael's feet, whither he had run in a last desperate dash for safety. The Ukrainian looked at his chief,

who was sitting forward, almost as though gloating over his last and most terrible kill. One hand held the pistol. The other gripped his wounded leg. Sweat was trickling down his livid face, and his eyes looked light and wild. Michael Konski was almost mad with pain and blood-lust. Grigorieff, toughened bandit though he was, turned back to his men with a shiver.

As the riders re-formed, Ladislav, Barbara, and the eight surviving Caucasians trotted into the courtyard on their reeking horses. One glance round him told Ladislav what had happened. He leaped from Mephistopheles and ran up the steps, Barbara at his heels.

‘My God!’ he burst out. ‘You devil! You bloody devil!’

‘Say one word more,’ hissed Michael, ‘and I’ll have that woman crucified against the castle door to greet my unbidden guests!’

Barbara thrust her revolver over Ladislav’s shoulder and pulled the trigger. It clicked absurdly. It was empty.

Michael laughed horribly.

‘I think,’ said he, ‘that I have made a reckoning with the two countries that damned me body and soul!’

‘He is mad,’ whispered Barbara.

Michael lifted his pistol.

‘Give me back my sword,’ he said.

Ladislav flung the silver-hilted sabre clattering on the steps.

The sound of its fall seemed to break some spring that was holding Michael erect in the chair. He almost crumpled together, his head sideways on his chest. Yet his right hand still held the pistol steadily. Grigorieff, who had got his men again in hand, cantered up.

'Your last orders, Michael Ivanovich, for the White Skulls?'

Michael stared as though uncomprehending.

'I think the Grodno bridge still holds,' he said at last slowly, picking his words, like a drunken man.

Grigorieff raised the hilt of his sabre to his lips.

'Then we can still hope to die in the open!' he cried.

He wheeled his charger and thundered out of the courtyard, his savage riders behind him. Michael Konski's whole body shook with soundless laughter. He raised his head.

'You two,' he said quietly. 'You, my wife, and you, my cousin. I have wronged you both; I hate you both. I salute your courage. Take my wife, cousin, and go!'

There was a pause.

'Mount your horses and go!' Michael repeated. 'The road to Slonim is still clear.'

Barbara laughed hysterically.

'I should like to kill you both,' Michael went on in the same slow, quiet voice. 'But I cannot kill you now. So take her, man, and go!'

'If you want to save her life, give us the car,' said Ladislás.

Michael shook his head.

'No, no,' he said, with a cunning smile. 'Why do you think I encouraged Grigorieff and his men to seek suitably gallant deaths? I keep the car for myself. The battle to the strong — the race to the swift! I am a cripple, cousin, thanks to you, but not yet a fool!'

Barbara put her hand on Ladislás's shoulder.

'I must get my kittens,' she said. 'Then we will ride.'

'Yes, ride,' cried Michael. 'Ride to Slonim, or to hell! But ride! Leave me, or I'll find the strength to shoot you both where you stand!'

Barbara hurried into the castle. Ladislás, waiting on the steps, reviewed the wild notion of risking everything for the possession of the Cadillac. To him it was obvious that Michael's insanity had broken all bounds; that at last he was utterly mad. One swift rush, a grapple, and for the risk of a bullet the car might be theirs. Yet frankly Ladislás shrank from it. There was something about the motionless cripple in the chair that rendered personal violence out of the question — something iron-like and

familiar; some likeness in the set of jaw and nose, something untameable about the eyes, that reminded him of someone — of his grandmother Jadwiga! That was it. Blood was thicker than water; in the event it told at the last. And Ladislas, for the first time very conscious of his kinship with his cousin, found something of explanation, even something of justification in that merciless, indomitable pride of blood which belonged alike to his cousin and his grandmother: an iron pride rising but fitfully in himself, in cavalry charge or duel, that in those elder generations drove them to follow their chosen destiny, and disregard excuse. Michael Konski was a cruel brute, but he had served no master but himself. In Jadwiga's eyes, perhaps, he would be justified.

Michael did not stir as Barbara and Ladislas went down the steps and mounted their horses. Their last memory of him was of scornful eyes and sneering lips above the unswerving Mauser. To tell truth Barbara's mind was practically more engaged upon the problem of the kitten in each pocket of her coat; Ladislas's idealistically upon Barbara. Both were curiously unmoved by the possibility of pursuing Bolsheviks. Yet they did not know that just beyond Slonim was Frank Boughton with a squadron of Polish cavalry which his diplomatic tongue had wheedled out of a general of his acquaintance in order to look for Ladislas, for whom he had a

considerable affection, of the Eton-and-Sandhurst order.

They rode southward for Slonim together. And behind them the firing round the Konski castle dropped to a mutter and died away.

CHAPTER XVII

MICHAEL STANDS UP

MICHAEL KONSKI shut his eyes wearily as Ladislav and Barbara rode together through the gap in the old wall and disappeared into the shadows of the trees that had for so long stood wardens to the Konski demesne. ~~At the same moment the distant firing by the Niemen rose suddenly to a climax and as suddenly ceased. The silence struck upon Michael's ears like a blow. It was as if the orchestra had played its final chord, the curtain had fallen. Yet he, the protagonist, still sat there on the stage — still lived. The pistol slid from his limp fingers to the ground. His head fell back and tilted slightly upwards. The searing red-hot pain had passed from his leg, leaving him numb and stupid with reaction and relief. He giggled a little.~~

Sitting there with his eyes shut, Michael could visualise two pictures very clearly. He knew very well what that last burst of firing symbolised. He could see, as clearly as if he had been again upon the summit of his tower, Grigorieff's final desperate ride to death; the Jew Uritzky, a smile of satisfaction on his thick fleshy lips, stepping delicately among the fallen men and horses, and pointing out to the Red guards behind him such as moved or

groaned ; the swift lunge of bayonets, the cruel smash of rifle-butts. . . . He saw also a Red cavalry patrol launched along the Slonim road, and catching Barbara and Ladislav on their nearly foundered horses within a mile. Their mutual happiness would be most satisfactorily nipped in the bud: a perfect tragedy of young love cut off by the remorseless shears of Atropos. At that operative conventionalism surely his giggle might justifiably change to honest laughter?

And yet somehow to Michael, sitting relaxed and free from pain, the thought of the Cossack lancers closing upon the heels of the fugitives brought little or no real satisfaction. No picture hangs alone upon the walls of the mind's gallery. And as Michael watched the edifying spectacle of his wife and cousin being untidily despatched, he saw also the picture of Ladislav, Michael's silver-hilted sabre in his hand, riding straight for the Grodno bridge; and the picture of Barbara, her eyes clean and unashamed, for all that her limbs shook with a fear beyond control, that night in Prince Andrew Bolkonsky's house in Petersburg. They had courage, those two, in their several, to Michael rather incomprehensible, ways. And to Michael's credit let it here be set down fairly and unequivocally that he had loved courage above all things. Yes, they were brave, those two. . . .

Michael opened his eyes. Below him a multitude of flies buzzed loathsomely above the heaped corpses

of the Poles. Against the far wall stood the Cadillac, Bill still fixed at his wheel, with the last survivor of the White Skulls, save for their chief, motionless as a graven image in the seat behind him. Michael beckoned with his left hand, and croaked an order through his parched lips. The Caucasian's rifle-barrel glinted in the sunshine as he moved and thrust it ungently into Bill's ribs. The Polish-American chauffeur had most candidly expressed his opinion of the whole affair. He had quietly fallen asleep.

He woke with a grunt and a curse at the impassive rifleman. The engine spluttered and roared disconcertingly. Then the big car rolled slowly across the courtyard to the foot of the steps. The Caucasian sprang out. Bill, hunched over his wheel, looked up sulkily.

'What's the game now?' he demanded forcibly.

Michael smiled and nodded.

'I am right not to go with you,' he began. 'I could never endure your company, my friend. You are in no respect sympathetic to me ——'

'Aw, hell!'

'No doubt the feeling is mutual,' continued Michael politely. 'I will not keep you long. Do you remember the road by which you first came to this castle? The Slonim road?'

'Yeh.'

'Bien! Take it, my friend, and drive fast. You

should pick up Captain Sale and a lady on horse-back within a short distance. Make them my compliments and good wishes for their safe return to Warsaw. And now go quickly! I do not wish you to find the Bolsheviks across the road.'

Bill stared. Something of the real meaning of this order crept into his bovine but essentially common-sense mind. His mouth opened slowly and shut quickly. It may be that he altogether understood. He lifted a grimy hand to his peaked cap in a clumsy almost involuntary salute.

'You also,' said Michael to the Caucasian.

The last of the White Skulls wasted no time in protest, argument, or change of expression. He squatted down gravely on the bottom step, kicked off one of his heavy boots, slipped his big toe into the trigger-guard of his rifle, placed the muzzle in his mouth, and blew out his brains. The car started for the Slonim road.

Making one more physical effort, Michael sat erect and watched it go. It was odd to watch one's life, as it were, enclosed in wood and metal, driven away from one through a gap in a wall: odd, and in actuality rather absurd. It was odd that one second's delay — that second in which Ladislav had preceded him in pulling trigger in the duel — should have signed one's death-warrant as surely as any despot, for all that the shot went low. In fine, it was odd to die. Yet it was surely more odd that one should

have ever lived at all. The one chance more than counterbalanced the other for irrationality, almost for imbecility.

So, like his grandfather before him, Michael sat in Stanislas Konski's chair, mildly appraising the strangeness of life while he awaited the certainty of death. It was so impossible to realise that to-morrow, when his eyes would be blind, his ears deaf, and his mouth choked with blood and dust, the sun would shine, and the wind whisper through the pines. Simultaneously it was impossible to imagine that to-morrow he could be alive. Man cannot escape death. Yet Man is constitutionally incapable of imagining the world without himself. Man, in short, remains always an inadequate and rather frightened animal. What then remains for Man?

'To live as though life were comprehensible. To die as though death were only a room in one's house hitherto unvisited,' muttered Michael to himself. 'Briefly, to clothe the folly of living in splendid garments, and greet the insanity of dying with a friendly gesture. For myself, the first is impossible. I chose the husks. I regret nothing. Whereas the second ——'

Awkwardly and painfully he drew his grandfather's sword from its battered sheath and laid the naked, rust-stained blade across the arms of the chair, the fingers of his right hand about the old-fashioned heavy hilt. . . .

~~It may have been that ghosts and memories brushed him with disquieting, unsubstantial wings as he sat there, nursing the old sword: his first pony; that terrible night when his father in his cups first revealed himself as a coward and a renegade; the vast parade-ground at Krassnoe under the sunshine of his first review; his opponent's white face and shaking hand in his first duel; his first breathless appreciation of Barbara's beauty. They may have come, and with them countless more of the gaudier recollections of his life. But if they came, they came as uninvited guests, unwelcome, disregarded. For Michael made no sign, whether they came or no. . . .~~

Some ten minutes later a disreputable old Ford car, entirely innocent of paint, its bonnet draped in a dirty red flag, its whole manner of progress reminding onlookers of nothing so much as a drunken charwoman staggering and lurching from side to side to the accompaniment of hiccoughs, crawled into the courtyard of the Konski castle. It contained the displeasing, round-shouldered person of the Commissar Uritzky in a conical helmet too big for his head and ornamented with a huge star worked in red flannel, a dirty khaki trench coat with a red brassard, trousers that had once been dark blue, and gum boots. Behind the Ford jingled a small cavalry escort.

The car uttered a final protest and stopped in the middle of the courtyard. Uritzky, with a curse at his driver, got out and stretched his legs, rubbing his

hands contentedly together, and talking to the commander of his escort with many smiles and little quick movements of the hands which betrayed the Jew. The officer laughed, and pointed to the door of the castle. Uritzky's eyes followed the line of the forefinger and widened perceptibly. Then he drew an enormous Colt revolver from his belt, ordered four of the escort to follow him, and approached the steps. He himself avoided the body of the dead Caucasian. The Red Guards were not so fastidious, and kicked it aside with appropriately humorous comments.

At the top of the steps Uritzky faced Michael Konski, rigid in his chair.

'Do you surrender, you blood-stained dog of a White?' demanded the Commissar, mouthing his words luxuriously.

Michael remained silent. Only his eyes moved in his tanned face, and they moved to meet and hold Uritzky's.

'Give up your sword, and take off that tinsel won by spilling the blood of the people!' snarled the Commissar.

And as Michael still made no sign of movement, or even of attention, Uritzky leaned towards him, and snatched at the Cross of Saint George on his breast.

With a superb effort of will and sinew Michael Konski thrust back the heavy chair and stood erect, supported on his one sound leg, towering over the mean figure of his enemy. Old Stanislas's sword

pierced Uritzky through and through, so that the hilt jarred against his breastbone. Then, as the Jew dropped with a scream, his hands pawing the sword still fixed in his body, the rifles of the escort rang out loudly.

Michael Konski, struck by four bullets, collapsed quietly into the chair. His head fell forward onto his hands. His body slowly overbalanced, pitched forward, and rolled down the steps, to lie sprawled and broken at their base. Above him, one of his Borzois, cruelly wounded, flinging its muzzle skywards, howled the death-cry for himself and his master.

EPILOGUE
BAYSWATER — 1920

EPILOGUE

BAYSWATER — 1920

O you have come back,' whispered Jadwiga. Ladislas nodded. There was an odd constriction in his throat which made speech difficult, and for some reason he was not seeing his grandmother as clearly as usual. Of course, he had scarcely recovered from the surprise occasioned by having to enter her bedroom. In all the years he had lived under her roof he had never crossed the threshold, nor seen the inner side of that door on the first floor of the house. And now he had been greeted on his return to England with the news that to see his grandmother in the future he would always enter her bedroom, for she would never leave it. That curiosity which is, perhaps, the least mortal of all human attributes drew his eyes from the little wasted figure in the bed to wander about the room. And when after a little while he looked again at Jadwiga, Ladislas had to blink to keep back tears.

To Ladislas his grandmother had always been a mask, though a mask to be admired. What lay behind the mask he had never begun to appreciate. He had never dared to face the question if there was anything behind it at all. And here, in her most intimate sanctuary, the mask was constant. There was nothing to betray it. The room was merely another aspect of the mask he knew. Its stark con-

sistency with the almost inhuman character of its occupant was to Ladislás infinitely more pathetic than any treasure-house of trivially dear memories. It reminded him of the Polish plains. It contained the mere essentials of living. Its curtains and carpet were of the same green as were those of the drawing-room of the floor below, and like that room it seemed uncomfortably overheated. It defied description, for there was nothing to describe. It was utterly lacking in personal knick-knacks: in ash-trays, calendars, indifferent water-colours, useless glass bottles, even the flowers which symbolise the more casual modern friendships. There was no photograph to remind Jadwiga of her dead husband, her dead daughter, or her living grandsons. Was it all, Ladislás wondered, a deliberate refusal to pander to human weakness, or was it only that Jadwiga was simply strong, quietly unconscious of the existence of that weakness? And, as he wondered, he was only sure of one thing, that he would never know.

Jadwiga's thin hands, on which the veins now showed startlingly blue, moved uneasily on the coverlet of the bed.

'I did not expect you to come back,' she said. Her voice was stronger now, but querulous. 'I am disappointed in you, Ladislás.'

'I should have written from Warsaw to explain,' said Ladislás. 'If I had known you were ill, I should have got back before this.'

The grey eyes that were still very much alive in the haggard, parchment-like face twinkled.

'You are in time to be in at the death, after the best English fashion,' said Jadwiga. 'Yes, I am glad to see you again. Eric telegraphed to me yesterday that he is coming back from Italy. I'm glad he will not be in time. Have you seen his verses, Ladislas? They're deplorable.'

Ladislas could find nothing to say. He shifted his feet awkwardly.

'Come and sit by me. My eyes aren't what they were,' continued his grandmother.

Moving clumsily, Ladislas shifted a stiff-backed chair from the wall to the bed, and sat down. Propped up on several pillows, and with her body sunk into the softness of a more than usually wide bed, Jadwiga, always small, appeared to consist of nothing below her head and shoulders. Ladislas felt acutely conscious of his bulk and strength, and almost ashamed of the brown muscular hand which he had approached timidly to the tips of Jadwiga's fingers. Deliberately she looked him up and down.

'You're well,' she said at last. 'Better-looking, and more of a man, thank God. Tell me why you left Poland. I had hoped you would stay there — become a Konski again. You knew that?'

He nodded.

'But that's not an English tunic you're wearing!' Jadwiga jerked herself up from the embracing

pillows, and leaned over to finger the silver braid on his crimson collar.

Ladislav made a feeble attempt to meet Jadwiga on her own ground.

'I'm afraid,' he said, 'that I've not disappointed you after all. I've denied you that satisfaction. I hold a Polish commission. I'm in London attached as interpreter to General Sikorski, who is here on a mission.'

And immediately he felt ashamed of himself, for Jadwiga lay back again in the bed, and closed her eyes. Her hand, still firm, closed over his.

'I'm glad. You have made me happy, Ladislav. Tell me everything,' she whispered.

So in that hot room Ladislav talked to his grandmother of his return to her old home, while beyond the tight-shut windows Kensington Gardens were bathed in the pale sunlight of a winter day, and the muffled roar of London traffic seemed an ironic commentary of Western civilisation upon this tale of the 'robber woods of Tartary.' But to Jadwiga it must all have seemed real, even commonplace. It belonged to the life she knew and loved, to which, for all that it had ended when she was a young girl, the rest of her existence had been an epilogue of quite singular boredom, most fitly set beside the Bayswater Road. She did not move nor interrupt; only lay quite still, holding her grandson's hand. She did not even open her eyes, till Ladislav told of how Bill had overtaken

Barbara and himself with the Cadillac near Slonim, and given them Michael Konski's last message.

'Did you ever hear what happened to Michael?' asked Jadwiga.

'For certain — no. But it is said that the Reds shot him.'

Jadwiga smiled.

'John was always a lucky scoundrel,' she muttered.

For a moment it seemed to Ladislav that her mind was beginning to wander. Jadwiga saw the bewilderment in his face.

'My brother, John Konski,' she said impatiently. 'Michael paid his last debt, so I may speak of him again. Even when we got into mischief together as children, it was always I who paid the shot. John was never caught, and never confessed. How I hated him!'

That hatred had lasted a lifetime, thought Ladislav. But he knew nothing of Ivan Konski's later life; of how he had been caught; how finally he had both confessed and paid his shot.

'I should like to have seen Michael,' said Jadwiga.

'I will bring Barbara to see you to-morrow,' said Ladislav.

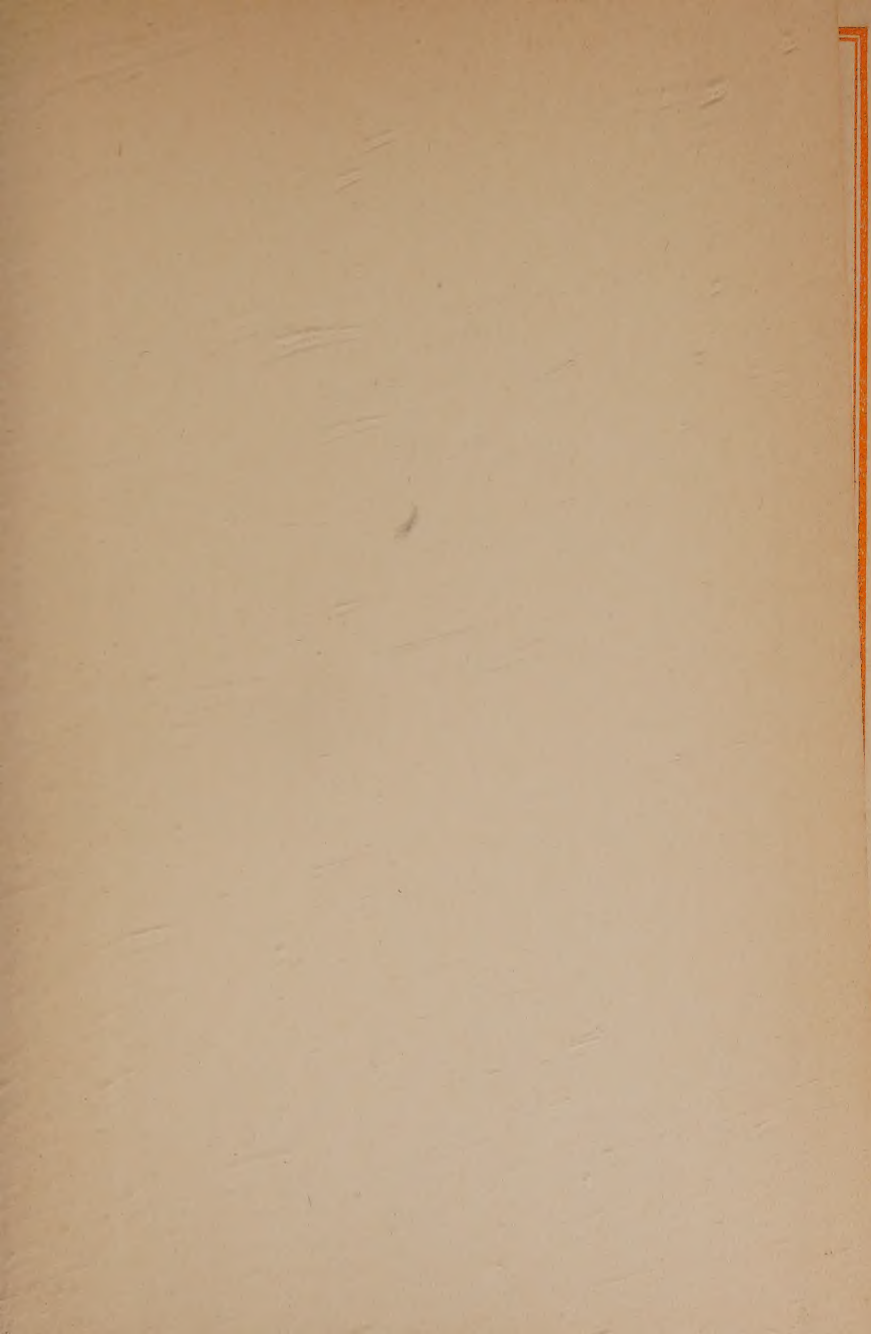
His grandmother did not seem to hear him. Her spirit was far away beside the stream of the Niemen, in the courtyard of the Konski castle. And that

castle had been Michael's home, as it had been hers.

'I should like to have seen Michael,' she repeated, and closed her eyes.

They were her last words — and Michael Kon-ski's only epitaph.

THE END





ROUND

TO WILNO

SIEMEN

MARSH

ROAD

THE CASTLE OF KONSKI AND ITS ENVIRONS



